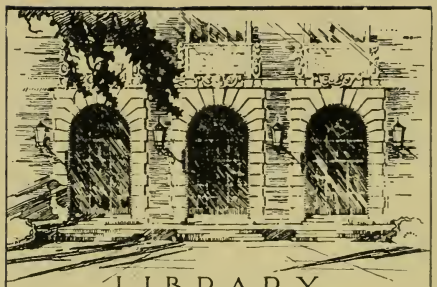
Who is Vera?

by A. E. Fehlowes



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WHO IS VERA?

Still a Wife's Sister

A NOVEL

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY A. E. SCHLÖTEL

'Let me not to the marriage of true mind
Admit impediments.'—*Shakespeare.*

Opinions of the Press.

'The book is cleverly written, and the interest is maintained fairly well throughout.'—*Church Times.*

'Is a very ingeniously complicated and successfully-told history. The descriptions are well done, and the author seems as much at home under Italian skies, or in South America, as off the Cornish coast.'—*Yorkshire Post.*

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'The three volumes which make up this novel are crowded with characters, full of incident, and replete with plot and counterplot. . . . . The characters of the middle-aged lawyer, Dr Penson, and of the young lady who earns her living by writing sermons, and who becomes Dr Penson's fourth wife, in spite of his objections to her "opinions," are well drawn, and the book is evidently the work of one possessed of both learning and common sense.'—*Jewish World.*

'In an excellent, though complicated, story, full of incident, adventure, and capitally-drawn characters, the writer puts up an earnest plea for a change in the marriage laws, which forbid a man to marry his deceased wife's sister. . . . . It is, in point of merit, much above the average of novels, while some of the characters are really fine creations.'—*Newcastle Weekly Chronicle.*

LONDON
GRIFFITH, FARRAN, OKEDEN & WELSH
(SUCCESSORS TO NEWBERY AND HARRIS)
WEST CORNER ST PAUL'S CHURCHYARD

Who is Vera?

A NOVEL

Wherein English and Russian Lives are Interwoven

BY

A. E. SCHLÖTEL

AUTHOR OF

'STILL A WIFE'S SISTER'

Though human, thou did'st not deceive me;
Though woman, thou did'st not forsake;
Though lov'd, thou forborest to grieve me;
Though slander'd, thou never could'st shake;
Though trusted, thou did'st not disclaim me;
Though parted, it was not to fly;
Though watchful, 'twas not to defame me;
Nor mute, that the world might belie.—BYRON.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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WHO IS VERA?

WHO IS VERA?

CHAPTER I.

THE AMATEUR.

'Absence of occupation is not rest;
A mind quite vacant is a mind distress'd.'
COWPER.

WINANDER COTTAGE changed owners—Lord Villeroy became Madame Verge's tenant.

Vera knew her health depended on the activity she forced upon her mind. Directly she felt symptoms of weariness, vexatious irritability in her moments of idleness, a loathing of life, and a desire to die, she knew they meant that the soul of her being, under stagnation, was becoming contaminated by an evil that she must combat and conquer. For her temperament to become melancholic was

suggestive of this sequence—ruin. To frustrate such a consequence, a cure must be sought at this early stage of hypochondria.

Vera could not frisk away time in gaiety, or riding; she took no exercise to tire her physically, but, mentally, was weary unto death.

The charm had gone from her garden; it was pain to her to see crops sown by Athelstan ripening, and he far away. There was a silent sadness surrounding her when on the lake—no loved hand near to help her disentangle fish from off her hook. Daily she was reminded she was alone, for no friend could fill the blank Athelstan's absence gave her life.

Six months' loneliness made Vera conscious she had a talent rusting, and at her age of twenty-one, she desired to revive the prestige that was growing strong at the time she retired from her profession to private life. Four years' absence might cause her name to pass out of the public mind for that time, but would not render her forgotten if she came forward again carrying the same flying, radiant colours on her staff as when she bowed her farewell. And she knew old favourites were generously welcomed by the English people, who were quick to recognise talent, and cheer the return of genius, when even the bright star had lost some of its lustre.

'Thoughts are but dreams till their effects

be tried.' Vera desired to help her husband, and dreamed Londoners would receive her joyfully. She left Winander Cottage to try the effects of dreams, and find scope for action, accompanied by her mother and son, by her dogs, birds, and marmosets. Her little daughter she confided to the charge of Lady Clara.

It touched Vera acutely to give up the duties of a parent to another. It was not avarice that prompted her to thirst for gold, or to allow her child to be adopted to enable her more easily to acquire it; for her mind was neither crude nor harsh. It was a call of duty that actuated her—a duty to herself, her husband, and children.

Lady Clara took delight in acting a mother's part to Athelstan's daughter. At last an opportunity occurred for her to benefit one who had steadily refused all pecuniary aid. Her own daughter and Athelstan's became playmates at 'The Laurium,' and as twin-children, they were dressed duplicates one of the other. Their fair hair and hazel eyes, their healthy, chubby cheeks, and glistening teeth peeping through ruddy lips were fac-simile. Gordon never knew the children apart. To distinguish them, he ornamented an arm of each with a silver bangle, engraved thereon were the names Hephzibah Morgane and Hephzibah Scott; but through the careless or intentional acts of the nurses, the bangles were often exchanged, and the

Morgane bangle decorated the infant Scott, and the infant Morgane wore the Scott badge of identification. Thus confusion increased, and Gordon gave up the puzzle, and treated both children as his own, which is equivalent to saying that he took little notice of either. He looked on them as pretty appendages to 'The Laurium,' as they tumbled about the lawn, beautiful infant models at play, such as would have delighted Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Vera had said Mr Morgane should know how nobly an actress could act, but his mind was now clouded by great mental depression, his power of thought failed him. Much that had given a lustre to his words was an artificial glow, and that not coming from a solid source, had died away gradually, and left a blank brain that over-pressure of cunning work had weakened. Mr Morgane was now habitually reserved, shunned his friends, and brooded gloomily. Whether the thoughts his mind fed upon were consolatory, or that he was a victim of remorse and misery, could not be ascertained, as he was taciturn and obtuse. Mrs Morgane alone knew no delusion was deceiving and preying on his mind when he often murmured, 'It is degrading to be an undetected criminal, but I have done my best;' yet no response from her would follow. She observed under this slothful apathy and listless *ennui* was buried

the better part of his nature—that a cowardice ruled him he could not conquer, which worked trouble in Winander Cottage, and retribution on the perpetrator of an unjust act.

In Madame Verge's small house in Kensington, Vera found solitude; not a solitude that fretted her as at Windermere, when Mr Morgane became her *bête noire*, ever in her mind to irritate and harass her, and she was repining and unforgiving; but a solitude filled with intellectual enjoyment, and lively hope of future action. Still, she was never idle, and when she appeared so, and closed her eyes with book in hand, it was the better to think out an original idea on a hackneyed theme, that she feign would clothe with a new and perhaps better rendering. The brain was fired with thoughts, and it was no idle work to try to shape them into utility and order; and shutting away all outward objects, helped to give an inward purpose greater power.

Vera was studying hard to make herself worthy of high price, as she had no theatre engagement. If desert must rule the sum she might command, she would labour so to deserve and reap fame and honour in the career she saw open to her.

Lord Villeroy disturbed Vera on an occasion when she was giving play to her ideas in practice. She admitted him to her room, where her table was moved from its appropriate place, and a chair was upon it.

'I am afraid I have interrupted you, cousin Vera.'

'Certainly you have. I could not go on with my performance whilst you looked on,' said Vera, laughing. 'How mad you will think me, when I tell you that chair is Macbeth, and I have been rating him well in proper form as Lady Macbeth. Take Macbeth off the table and sit upon him.

'For what use was he there at all?'

'Just to keep my eyes on a proper level. On the stage a turn of the eye is important. I have known a glance of scorn, or a look of sympathy bring the house down. I am glad to see you, cousin Ralph, though your letter of yesterday gave me this news, that your friends would keep you at Winander Cottage for a month or two.'

'Yes, a day or two ago that was possible, but an idea struck me.' Lord Villeroy came to a full stop.

'You lay much stress on your idea; surely it is not the first and only idea that ever did strike you.'

'That is unkind, very unkind, and you were paramount in the idea; but I forgive you. Well, my first idea was—'

'Oh! you had two ideas. Cousin, you are getting on.'

'What makes you merry to-day? Come into

money? I wish you had, though your possessing it might crush my idea.'

'Money! no, far better. Good news from Malavita. I may act again; Athie gives me permission at last. Let me hear your ideas now.'

'My last is, to congratulate you on this good news. Another is on a dull subject. Winander Cottage is not in the least jolly, now you are out of it. So odd, to find the absence of one person could make such a painful difference. I was always expecting to see you, as I fancy a ghost might haunt the mind of a nervous person.'

'The absence of one person made me leave the cottage,' Vera said thoughtfully.

'Then you can sympathise and understand my feeling.'

'Poor boy! what folly to compare that which admits of no comparison. Now, your third idea—the idea with pith.' Vera assumed a more serious tone; the good nature and fund of unselfish generosity she had discovered in Lord Villeroy's nature made her spare him.

'I have numerous friends, Vera, some very wealthy patricians. May I introduce you and Madame Verge to them?'

'Do you mean to introduce mother and me to them *en bloc?*'

'Certainly. I want you to make a sensation;

get your name well up, then the managers will come cap in hand to you. The important aim is to make money, and you could ask your own terms; but if you go cap in hand to the managers they have the best of the contest.'

'I flatter myself I have made a name, but still, I thank you for the suggestion. Now tell me how I may electrify society with a new sensation.'

'I wish to make a proposition.' Lord Villeroy became embarrassed. This nervousness tied his tongue, and gave him a simple expression that belied his talent.

'I am essentially professional, Ralph, and see no way to money-making, except by the cap-in-hand business being done by me to make a fair start on fortune's road. Your idea must savour of the amateur. May I hint this difference?'

'Glad you have, for that hits the nail's head. That perfect little theatre, the Cicero, the most central in London, is to let. Dummiedun fails to hit the taste of the public in selection of pieces and cast. My friend Davids tells me I can have that theatre for a nominal sum. The chance must not be missed.'

'Of what use is a theatre to you, Ralph?'

'It is to be yours; and in tragedy I can act fairly well.'

'Really, Ralph! I never saw you in passion above the rigid rules of cold, formal society.'

'Well, off the stage, Vera, your tragic force is not seen, yet you tell me, you had been rating Macbeth in fine style, before you asked me to sit upon him. One does not know the power of their dramatic feeling or imagination until tried. I have been tried, and can act. Criticise me. Give me your opinion of my properties in voice, nerve, and such-like qualifications.'

'I will. You have a good full voice, when your nerves allow it fair play. Your face, figure, and manner are qualifications that a manager would delight in, if backed by a good head, and some training as an actor.'

'Good, so far. Now tell me what *rôle* would suit me.'

Vera said, half in joke,—'A general of the last century, occupied in writing despatches; or a smart aide-de-camp, carrying orders; in short, any part in which you would be much seen, and almost silent.'

Lord Villeroy brooded over this unsatisfactory reply; at length he said,—

'It is impossible to know how much Greek and Latin may be in a man by looking in his face, or measuring the proportions of his figure. No, that is impossible!'

'Granted, Ralph; and if you are proficient in classics, stop at your books, for usually men cannot gain eminence if they follow several pursuits.'

'Eminence and I are wide apart, for I am more book than original; yet the Greek plays at Mangle College would have fallen flat and died out had I not had the energy to rescue them from that fate. Added to this, Vera, I have caused sensation when I smothered Desdemona, and my Hamlet has been much applauded.'

Lord Villeroy spoke with earnestness. Much of his natural disposition was actuating him, as he conversed with the woman whom, in his folly, he passionately loved. He was weak enough to indulge a hope that the climate of Malavita might prove fatal, and remove the obstacle that was the impediment to his openly avowing his ill-placed attachment. Under this influence, he had some repugnance to Vera's appearance in public without his ægis to protect her from supposed evils.

Thus impressed, Lord Villeroy had prepared himself to play his game, and he gave Vera testimonials relating to his capacity as an actor.

'At your leisure,' said he, 'scan these paragraphs that were printed in the *Iris*, they are short reports of my doings; and I will now tell you my idea in a few words. A month must elapse before we can open the Cicero under a new name and new conditions as the amateur's nursery. During that time, will you join our band of amateur actors formed by the *élite?* A good actress able to sustain an important *rôle*

is a desideratum. May I introduce you? Do say you will join us!'

Vera answered, with a smile of incredulity playing on her lips the while,—'Thus introduced to the English patricians, among whom caste holds sway, is it possible I, the actress, can be noticed as an equal? No, Ralph, I cannot make a fiction of my life; live in poverty, and yet play a part in splendid independence at times. I have enjoyed an actress's life after my own mood; living in my sphere, and in privacy among pleasures to my taste, when no longer doing my duty in giving amusement to those who bought it of me. I never became a member of the "Philistines" and sacrificed comfort to empty show. I felt above the meannesses that often make up the lives of individuals who swell themselves, as Æsop's fabulous toad, more and more until fatal results cause the whole fabric to fall. My toil will be heavy, so my pleasures must be light in my hours of rest. My dear cousin, you propose to put an ape in my hood! Why wish me to assume a false place in the patrician world?'

'Undoubtedly you belong to it; you are my cousin, and Mr Morgane's daughter-in-law; the only thing wanting is your consent to join us. As an inducement to join us, know that we act to aid any pet charity that may be in need of help.'

'Ralph, the difference between an amateur

and a professional is this: amusement, and earning daily bread. My pet charity work is to help my husband; any work to benefit him I would seize readily; but to follow out what you propose would waste precious time, though pretty enough work for an amateur.'

Lord Villeroy's hopes were cast down. He said,—'I am always unlucky.'

Unlucky! The man had but one thing on earth to please—himself. He was master of his land and fortune, and he had health; yet one thing was lacking, and he is unlucky. Who, then, is lucky? Surely Villeroy, if content.

Lord Villeroy pleaded once more. Under excitement, his rich, full voice lost all hesitation, as he said,—'Pray, consent to join us until you get an engagement. Directly you become a professional we must lose you, but until then be one of us.'

'To keep a theatre only for charitable purposes is an expensive pastime,' said Vera demurely.

'Our theatre will be the leading attraction of the season; our patronage is wide and good. Davids will manage the money matters, and every item is on paper—even to gas, and the sum put down is not to be exceeded. There is plenty of money in the band, so your dresses shall not cost you a sou; only to look and act your best is all we want of you. Come, consent.

Shall I put Macbeth on the table, before I leave to tell the good news to my friends that you will join the Strollers?'

'Raise him to his proper height, and his wooden head shakes as he warns us; listen.' Vera altered the tone of her voice and said,—'If we should fail.' Then in a firm voice, as Lady Macbeth, continued,—'"We fail! but screw your courage to the sticking place and we'll not fail!"'

'You good witch!'

'"When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning, or in rain?" Now, brush up Macbeth, and I am ready for introduction and rehearsal at any moment.'

'I cannot find words to express my gratitude.'

'I scarcely merit thanks, Ralph, for I act with you until a better time comes to me; then farewell to all amateurs.'

Vera consented, without reflecting if the course would make or mar her fate in the future.

CHAPTER II.

COUNT ZANKAL'S ENTERTAINMENT.

'All the passions make us commit faults, but love makes us commit the most ridiculous ones.'

LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

'Art thou not dearer to my eyes than light?
Dost thou not circulate thro' all my veins,
Mingle with life, and form my very soul?'

YOUNG.

FTER much discussion among the leading artists of the day, the costumers made furbelows, ruffles, and ruffs, size of pouf for pantaloons and sleeves, to accord with the drawings and studied designs suited to the characters in the 'Merchant of Venice;' and before the *élite* of London society, the 'Merchant of Venice' was performed in a private theatre attached to a noble residence, temporarily occupied by a distinguished Russian.

The performance was enthusiastically ap-

plauded. Mrs. Morgane's Portia, Lord Villeroy's Shylock were inimitable. This first step was a success, stamping the venture with the indelible good-will of Lord Villeroy's many friends, that gave him the support he was anxious to gain in connection with Vera.

Madame Verge was startled at seeing Peter Rimboff among the audience. No look of recognition passed between them, for the dread of spies was sufficient to keep them apart as strangers to each other.

It was early in the year 1867. Madame Verge had heard that Peter Rimboff had been under suspicion, and had suffered arrest. In a word, Russian justice demanded to look behind his curtains, and into his secret drawers, and to gratify a prudent curiosity and hankering to overhaul his residence, when his absence was made sure by placing him in the grip of the police. Madame Verge had not heard that he had been allowed to walk out of his prison unaccused, and not knowing on what plea his liberty had been restrained ; but such was a fact.

Rimboff was forced to submit to this infraction of justice; he asked no questions concerning it, and he was unquestioned. He had learned the value of silence, but he kept an open ear ever ready to profit by the utterances of others. Enough for him to know that still his name was untainted, still he could act his double part, and

add his strength to a cause that was dear to him.

To be arrested when in full working harness, even with pen in hand, was a severe test to such a man as Demetrius Krainsky; for his double, Peter Rimboff, it was harmless as taking a child away from his toys and scrutinising their construction in his absence, and opening the hidden mechanism that gave music or moved the fans of the toy windmill.

Demetrius Krainsky's dangerous toys, if touched, would have fanned breezes or played music that would have jarred harshly on the ear of despotism. Yet so cunningly had this double man devised his plans, that he was calm as an innocent child whilst high authorities scanned his papers, seeking for secret wheels within wheels to lay bare a plot, or a word that would sanction them to add a name to their list of arrests that already amounted to a high figure.

Demetrius Krainsky, a name known to the Russian detective police, and well entangled in their meshes; known to spies, outposts, political police, and all members of the widespread machinations of a strong bureaucratic-autocracy, became worthless when the bearer of it was in the grip of the functionaries who would have strained every muscle to have firmly held him, but who, under an *alias*, slipped as easily through their fingers as an eel. All charms are

not fictions, for a charm existed in the name Rimboff, that Demetrius Krainsky constantly worked to his good.

Though papers were under Krainsky's roof that might have cost him his liberty, and banishment far away from friends and cause, they were so well hidden that only two events could have revealed their existence, viz., his trusted friend turning traitor to his cause, or his house being pulled down and its foundations disturbed. Thus Demetrius Krainsky trusted his fellow-worker as implicitly as the hiding-place; no word from him, and no searching by officials, brought to light the manipulations and chief spring of a scheme which the State agents were stirring every fibre and strength of nerve to gain. The hand was upon the instrument, the mark of the axe was upon the nugget, yet the nugget was unknown to be within grasp.

Peter Rimboff returned to his house apparently a loyal man to despotism, a friend to order, an enemy to reform, devoted to the scheme of maintaining the deepest ignorance among a rural population—serfs emancipated so recently as six years, and scarcely knowing their own worth, or understanding their new position. He was even willing to turn a blind eye on peculations, though he knew money raised to build and maintain schools found a resting-place in deep pockets, and the schools

and teachers became myths now and for ever; and he knew, too, money never returned to the same channel from which its flow had been diverted. So lived Rimboff.

Demetrius Krainsky had other work, viz., to build up free institutions, to crush despotism, to spread far and wide a *desire* for education as a seed for further growth among people whose crass ignorance rendered them brutish, and degraded them to misery and suffering. It was a clever, subtle brain that directed the double course of this double-minded man, who was perfect in each character. He styled himself the 'man-of-day' and the 'man-of-night.' By day, the friend of despotism; by night, the hardest worker for its fall, the strongest dreamer of success in all he advocated as coming blessings, such as a free country, free press, and, the crowning event, a national constitution in which the voice of the people would be heard.

So well did the 'man-of-day' absorb the 'man-of-night,' that the highest State functionaries placed implicit reliance in the truth and views of Rimboff, and counted him a valuable member of the State. But where was the trusted man found less than twenty-four hours after his detention ceased? With his dark mystery in his secret chamber, there to meet the sign to denote that its contents had been

put to the uses for which they had been designed, there to find his friend was true to his trust. He turned to work again, filled with fresh material. Enthusiastic antagonism to despotism, increased by the injustice of his arrest, heated his brain and inspired him to pen severe and heart-piercing words to a stifled people who panted for that refreshing drop of freedom that he was giving up home, ease, and comfort to add his weight in the revolutionary element to attain.

Now, under the roof of a Russian, he dare not recognise his wife, for in the face of day she had once borne the name of Krainsky, and he studied to avoid risk or compromising one inch of ground already gained. For the moment he forgot the path that Pliny decides leads to everlasting glory and renders man a god; he forgot his life's object to assist man. A father's pride in his child's talent meeting praise, deep attention, and entrancing many minds, made him conscious that he possessed food for home affection; and he heartily joined in the simultaneous applause that greeted Vera, and that was far above the usual languid plaudits given by so aristocratic an assembly.

When the play was over, and the greater number of the guests had left, the reception rooms were opened, and Count Zankal entertained his friends with lavish hospitality. A

suggestion whispered by Count Zankal in Rimboff's ear awakened a quick turn of thought in Rimboff's brain.

'You wish to introduce me to a young rich girl. No, no, Zankal! youth and romance would be out of place in my salon, and would not harmonise with the heart that has for so many winters lodged in solitary coldness in my breast.'

'Think again. My friend is young, and in this, her first season, has created a sensation.'

Count Zankal gave the hint in this spirit—

'Think well of it—
It soon may be too late.'

'Leave me some choice, Zankal. Who is that handsome lady talking with Prince Terence?'

'Madame Verge,—Portia's mother, and a widow.'

'A widow and mother are positions that kill romance. Prince Terence leaves her. Introduce me to her.' So the deed was done.

A *sotto voce* conversation made Madame Verge quickly understand that Rimboff required her aid, and to speak with her on this subject was the prime motive that called him to England and to Count Zankal's entertainment.

Could she give him aid in the form he desired?

Most painful conditions and self-sacrifice

were demanded of her; hardships that must be undertaken to help Rimboff's designs.

Madame Verge consented to these distressing conditions. First condition, to join Rimboff in Russia; for no persuasion could reconcile his will to see that his right course would be to live in England. Second condition, to cease to have correspondence with Vera, and to cut herself off from her as completely as if dead. Such was the wooing of Rimboff, such the unhappy state of the wooed; but Count Zankal flattered himself that he had given the first aid to form a happy match, until death grimly played the cruel part of separation.

During supper an incident occurred causing Rimboff annoyance. His greatest enemy seated himself opposite to him, and watched him closely. On a bonbon motto paper Rimboff wrote a few words, conveying this truth to Madame Verge, who read it and tore the paper into many pieces. 'That is not a kind way to treat a love message,' said Rimboff as he collected the pieces. He chewed some, and the rest he put in his hand under his glove, as he thought out the question, 'Could it be possible that he was recognised?'

A scowl was on his enemy's face, but Rimboff doubted whether the face ever carried any expression but a scowl. Still, he was not at his ease.

Madame Verge and Rimboff left the supper-table, and met a slight crush at the doorway. Lady Clara was behind Madame Verge and said gleefully, 'Auntie, what a success! Congratulate Vera in my name. I cannot get near her; people of all nations are paying homage to her. Princes, dukes, even an archbishop is in the throng at her feet; Father Cleon and I are quite outsiders. Father Cleon has just remarked, that Vera has the soul of poetry in her; and to add my laurel leaf and berry to the wreath that she has won by common acclamation, please tell her how delighted I am to see her exalted so high by her own merits. To-morrow I leave England for Italy.'

'So soon!' exclaimed Madame Verge.

'Ah! Vera has all news, and will tell you my route.'

'Introduce me by name very distinctly to your friend. I have a good reason for my request,' said Rimboff in undertone to Madame Verge.

Madame Verge immediately complied, and within a yard of her stood the man with scowling brows.

Rimboff appeared to give attention to Lady Clara's light talk, but his eye and mind were on his enemy. The sound of the name of Rimboff did not modify the scowl; its effect added a puzzled look, and that was followed by a look of keen scrutiny.

If a king's couch is not strewn with roses, neither is a conspirator's path. The king often creates the thorns that goad him to restless misery, whilst he who tries to get near the couch to cast more stinging briars upon it must toil over a spiked and painful pathway to gain his object. In this path Krainsky, *alias* Rimboff, had chosen to walk; and the king's couch the man of evil aspect had elected to guard.

When the crush became less, and the guests were able to disentangle themselves and put a wider space between each other, Rimboff put himself near his foe, as he said,—

'Madame, you spoke of the Nihilists and expressed fear of them. They are as harmless as smoke; a puff of wind will blow them out of existence, for their combination is as loose as a dense cloud of dust. The particles are there, I admit, but with gauze over your face, to enable you to keep your eyes open, you may walk through the mass and feel for yourself its weakness, and how soon the grains must fall to the ground and not be discerned by the keenest eye. Such an imaginary force cannot shake the imperial rock, nor can Imperialists deign to notice so unformed an element of discontent. Ladies are prone to conjure into being imaginary terrors, yet I agree with you that it is well to brush away the troublesome flies, whose creeping peculiarities disturb complete rest.'

'Herr Rimboff, we entirely agree that Nihilism is a scare, wanting in strength, and will soon die out in its own inanition.' Madame Verge spoke with energy her first words to aid her husband, under his false name and conditions, and she repeated his name, 'Herr Rimboff, take me to Count Zankal; I wish a word with him before leaving.'

The man with the scowling brow, whose name was Nief, followed Rimboff and Madame Verge, but they had played their part out, and had reason to think with success, and were silent.

The guests were leaving quickly one after another. Lady Clara was muffled in wraps, and resting on the arm of Father Cleon, waiting the announcement of her carriage. In an ante-room Gordon Scott was lecturing Lord Villeroy in an undertone, on morality, after this manner,—

'Come, Shylock, my worthy Jew,' said he, 'collect your scattered brains, rule your heart and nerves better than this. Avoid looking a fool, if you be one. Never fall in love with another man's wife. How many times I have read you this lesson, still to no good purpose.'

'Ah! we'll pluck a crow together, surely,' answered Lord Villeroy, with a tone of surliness, as he glanced at Mrs Cade, who was adjusting, in becoming folds, the ends of a hood that surrounded her pretty, winsome face.

'*Eine krähe hackt der anderen die augen nicht aus*,' Gordon replied, with caution, then nodded a friendly farewell to Ralph, and interrupted Mrs Cade's course of vanity before the mirror, by saying, 'Chris, ma belle, I hear my name called,' and regardless how the arrangement of hood might be, he drew Mrs Cade's pretty little hand affectionately over his arm, and followed Lady Clara and Father Cleon, and this ill-assorted party of four drove away in one carriage.

Lord Villeroy was left with his irritating reflections as his companions. Unhappy Ralph! foolish Ralph! Why misplace affection? Why dream a dream of romance and fancy the romance a reality?

Ralph was a spoilt man of fortune, too weak of his own free will to shun a dangerous pleasure, too self-indulgent to avoid an evil that might grow out of a pleasant folly.

Daily he courted Vera's society, as much for his love of her, as his love of acting, and he forgot he was playing a game dangerous to his own happiness.

He remained by the entrance that Vera must pass, he strained his ear to catch the sound of her voice, that he had been simple enough to invest with a charm that rendered every other voice harsh and irksome to listen to.

Rimboff and his enemy Nief passed out

speaking together in a language Lord Villeroy did not understand; they drove away together in a cab. Madame Verge joined Lord Villeroy; she was agitated, fearing evil was foreshadowed in this sudden alteration of Rimboff's manner towards a man whom he had said was a spy when in his own country. Madame Verge tried to be brave, for she had consented to share the risks and dangers attending the life of a conspirator, whose conscience whispered to him was the life of a patriot.

Rimboff's cab had been long lost in darkness, still Vera lingered in giddy prattle among her gay admirers.

What was all this small talk? Just that spice of mirth, that light essence that overpowers for the moment all consciousness of care, cheers the hour, banishes sorrow, and quickens the mind to rise above depression, swells the light heart till delight is told in laughter, prevents life withering, gives a sparkling colour to the darker hues that blend in sober serious converse, makes the peer forget the weight of his obligations of wealth or position, and the beggar his poverty and rags. This light, mirthful talk cheats us into many deceptions, makes us happy, adds a breath of hope that there is still joy in life that makes the aged heart youthful.

Lord Villeroy's mood was always his master; he was displeased. Vera gay, and joining in a

hubbub of talk among a group of new acquaintances, he construed to mean an act of ingratitude; he felt discarded. Foolish Ralph! Vera too well knows the game in life she has to play. She must be popular, and her aim is to become a favourite, and henceforth she must sometimes act when off the stage a part ever foreign to her nature and tastes. Madame Verge entered her carriage, followed by Vera; even then Ralph had to bear further annoyance. Prince Terence seated himself opposite Vera. Ralph's mood made him dumb during the drive; but Prince Terence, cheery and jocose, chatted glibly until he alighted at his residence.

'A more conceited coxcomb never disgraced mankind,' said Lord Villeroy, as the carriage again moved on the road home, and the absence of Prince Terence caused his mood to change, and he became affable.

'I thought the coxcomb clever,' said Vera.

Lord Villeroy returned to his sulky mood.

CHAPTER III.

MRS BURT AND HER FAMILIAR.

'Dark spirit! what must be
The madness of thy memory!'—BYRON.

THE morning after Count Zankal's entertainment, a railway porter was about to drop a letter into a letter-box as a servant opened the door at the same instant. There was a look of confusion on the man's face as he stood before her, the letter still in his hand.

'Who is your letter for?' said Mrs Burt, who was Vera's housekeeper.

'Madame Verge, and it is marked immediate, please follow that direction.'

'That won't stir it till first post, then I will draw the batch. You go north sometimes, eh?' Mrs Burt looked hard in the porter's face.

'Never.'

'What's the use of G.N. on your uniform if

you are not a porter in the service of the Great Northern ?

The man laughed at his own fears as he said, 'I only do special duties. Deliver this letter to Madame Verge immediately.'

'You have done your duty,' said the woman as she took the letter, 'now, I will do mine.'

The man walked away and passed by a small house of dingy aspect, the faded curtains and dirty windows added to its look of dreariness. He turned back a few steps. By this move, he could see at a glance all who were in the street, an act of caution that was necessary before he opened the door with his latch-key. He entered the house, and found his work there far from the railway station, to which his uniform suggested he belonged.

Mrs Burt's love of ruling made her a very early riser, very meddlesome, and very prying. After she had taken the letter, and picked up the large black cat, that according to its daily habit had sat at the threshold, she closed the door, and returned to the basement of the house thus laden, and with her head full of curiosity.

Mrs Burt prepared her breakfast, and put the letter on a jug of boiling water.

'Never opened a letter in my life, Puss, but the hot water has opened many for me; well, this was hasty written, hasty sent, so it shall be hasty read.

Then, for Puss's edification, she read with difficulty the following words :—

'My dear wife, I leave England this morning; recall our conversation of yesterday.' 'That's a mystery to me, Puss.' 'Act on this note; arrive at the time and place appointed. I may not see you for some weeks; do not be anxious about me, I may not return direct home.' 'What husband ever did, Puss? Then come some hilogliphics; don't see their sense no more than if you had mewed. Poor dear always told me I wrote hilogliphics, but mine were nothing to these; I could read mine. Stop,—I make out another line.' 'I have reasons for writing this letter in English.' 'I make nothing out of the reasons; but they are not my business to understand.'

Mrs Burt put some gum on the envelope and fastened it, after she had replaced the letter, and no trace was left that it had been opened.

The strangeness of the note did not strike her until she looked at the address. 'Madame Verge, plain as a pike-staff. What a riddle! Madame Verge is a widow, and the letter began dear wife! Extraordinary! Well, Puss, we will keep our eyes and ears open, for we know a thing or two already. We see in the dark, and sniff the morning air too, and get something more than a sniff for our trouble. Poor dear's

last words were, "Stick to the Caston family, it will be your fortune in the end if you keep a silent tongue, and speak only at the proper time." To this day—with no sordid motives; they be dead years ago—I still stick to it in a form. That is settled; but I almost wish I had not read that letter, it sets one's brain working. La! I hear the footsteps of these lazy maids; I will clear away.'

This eccentric woman picked up her huge black cat, and went to her own room. There she sang snatches from operas in a fairly finished style, and put herself in fantastic attitudes, as though she were acting a part, and actuated by some remembrance of the past. She suddenly came to a full stop, as the clock struck eight, and the door-bell rang at the same time.

'Hester, follow me upstairs; I will unlock the letter-box and sort the letters.'

'Always eager after letters; gone mad on them and the door-steps.'

'I only do my duty,' replied Mrs Burt, with an air of importance. 'I look after Madame's interests.'

The letters were distributed. Mrs Burt took a share of six, and carried them upstairs, encumbered with the cat and hot water; possibly she had gum handy to help her to hide the interest she took in her dear Madame's correspondence and affairs.

CHAPTER IV.

SCHEMES.

'Time shall unfold what plaited cunning hides.'
King Lear.

WHILST Madame Verge was reading her husband's letter, Demetrius was in the room with the dingy curtains and dirty windows, seated at a table covered with papers and letters. He was connected with a league, as secret as the league of Pythagoras at Croton, and his dearest hopes were strong that it might be as successful in sending forth legislators and political reformers of the wisest type.

Surrounded by his dangerous toys, he was happy as a child with one idea, in which he knew there was a vein of mischief that spiced it with adventure. His mind was strong and flexible, and in addition he was prudent—even cunning. His nature was known, and the secret party owed much of its strength to his

connivance, prompt action, and double knowledge. Rimboff at this moment was absent from his parties, yet acting for them. The disaster that might have happened to his sovereign gave despotism good cause to unbridle the fury of tyranny, to injure the progress of Liberalism, and render abortive the effort to gain reformation without illegal force. Demetrius saw this difficulty, and worked hard to avoid any act of violence to obtain the ends he wished.

Rimboff reasoned fairly, and knew that no good would be gained through the free will of his emperor, who for years past had been growing more despotic, undoing much he had done by his power of autocracy that his advisers compelled him to sway ; and he had long ceased to be a reformer, and any reform voluntarily given was now hopeless.

Rimboff saw with pain a retrograde movement gain ground, leading to greater discontent, greater oppression and suffering, thus fanning the smouldering embers of the revolutionary feeling against a government that preferred to work in darkness and corruption rather than face the refining light of publicity, and challenge popular opinion.

Among the mixed tribes, Demetrius would nevertheless use moral force ; still evade censorship, and try to implant some of the en-

lightenment of the neighbouring nations into the benighted provinces of his own country. Stealthily and in secret should this seed be sowed by his invisible hand; fostered by his rich genius, and by the help of the highest intellects in his country. To ensure success, Demetrius stirred all means at hand to spread over his grand nation mental food to nourish minds that ardently longed to taste richer nutriment than declamatory arguments, false premises, and wrong conclusions.

When Demetrius gained his freedom and returned to work in the world, no serfdom existed, but he contrasted time past and time present, and found the emancipated serf forlorn and oppressed by hard conditions, and even worse off than when under serfdom. The injustice of man to man he found as rife as ever; this injustice touched some nine-tenths of the whole population of his country, and he foresaw what a future such a system of despotism and submission might work.

Demetrius saw in England great efforts made to save every child from the gutter, whilst among his own people the serf was falling into deep degradation, and autocratic rule was dooming millions to gutter life. But he saw also the Russian who loved his country better than his own selfish comforts, who was as eager as Dr Barnardo in the noble work, to give the masses

benefits craved for, and fitted for them to receive, and to raise them out of the brutalising influences which surrounded them.

Demetrius knew his aims required time to develop, and that the first steps to this end would be slow; but he desired to see these steps taken in right earnest, and he was hopeful that results would be satisfactory.

'Ability enough,' muttered Rimboff, as he turned from one manuscript to another, and sorted printed papers. 'A remedy must be possible, though the fetters of autocracy are riveted fast on all freedom—bondage must end. Oh, for a constitution! for a power to sway the destinies of my people without oppression! What strength my poor country would gain! Hard and persevering pressure may force this end—such common-sense views as are scattered here, must bear some fruit. Truly I work in a noble mission.'

Rimboff's mutterings ended suddenly. A peculiar knock at his door arrested his attention.

A man entered the room, apparently about the age of twenty-four, his eye was full of vivacity, his face pale and well formed, lines denoting an intelligent mind were marked on his fine features, his manners were calm and collected, and he spoke in a decided tone and deep voice. He said,—

'Have you looked over my work? What is

your opinion?' and held out his hand in a friendly spirit.

'Ossinman, you are working too hard,' said Rimboff, as he took the young man's hand. He spoke in Polish, and the young man answered in the same language.

'Have I worked to your satisfaction? That is the test. I have not worked too hard, if my labour is not seen in my writing. I fancied my tale flowed easily, how does my fancy agree with your opinion?'

'Your tale runs as continuous and brightly as a sparkling cascade under a bright sun.'

'Think you that I have hit the object desired?'

'Well, the pathos touches one's heart deeply —the incidents are true—unfortunately too true in the lives of many Russians. These incidents so well portrayed, must stir the coldest natures into a warm sympathetic feeling. Ossinman, you have reached the sublime, and through the name of Rimboff, the reception your work must meet from the public will recompense your labour, and overtly convert the most obstinate enemy to reform into a disciple of justice.'

'Thanks; your words give me hope. Can you improve the title?'

'"Truth travestied. A Romance of this Century." The title is good. The word romance saves your work, and will make it read. The

most prosaic will indulge in romance at idle moments, and in those moments is the heart more deeply touched than when the brain is preoccupied in busy labour. The title, too, will take the women; they try to help our cause, and romance is as eagerly read by them, as played among them.'

'Our work and theirs is not all romance.'

'There may be romance in real life; I have found little in my life—even less in those lives I have watched and studied under various conditions.'

Ossinman gave his shoulders a quick impulsive shrug, as he said,—

'It may be but a romantic fancy that makes us work to reform a headstrong monarch and his false courtiers, and endeavour to place them at the head of the national constitution.'

'Keep your romantic fancy well stimulated with that idea, let no fair heroine, as you depict in "Truth travestied," move your whim to work out that desired reform.'

'I am cured for life—no heroine lives for me.'

'No, no, not at your young age, unless—'

'Ah! unless last evening cured me.'

'Thrown over—eh?'

'Not so; my tale is short. It is now a year ago, I went to Windermere *en route* to other lakes. The morning after I arrived I idled time away in fishing from a punt. I became dreamy,

at last sleepy, and closed my eyes. I forgot fish, rod, my very self. I was lost wholly in a flight of imagination. I was in a day-dream, when the softest voice reached my ear, asking pardon for disturbing me, and claiming the punt I was using. I opened my eyes, and saw the fairest vision permitted man on earth. Before me, in a small boat, was a girl; her golden hair had become unruly by the breezes, and, as she rested with her sculls under one hand, she removed her hat and arranged the straying heavy tresses that had escaped from under the ribbon band that encircled her head. I was dazed, whether by her beauty or my dreamy humour, I know not. Everything around me was strange. I seemed unable to recall my senses to direct me to proper words and actions. I simply stared on the vision before me, not knowing whether I was on the Neva, the Volga, the Danube, or the Rhine. I was conscious that I was on water, and that some voice had spoken to me in the English language. Whilst I thus rudely stared as on a vision, the same sentence was repeated in French that had been spoken in English. Now my bewilderment was doubled. I fancied I was on the Meuse, and the green hill appeared to me the thickly-built height at Dinant. How well I remember my dilemma, and how conscious I was that all was a dream; yet I had a vague idea I had no right to be exactly where

I was. Then the same voice spoke again, now in German, repeating the same sentence; at last its sense reached my brain, and my mind woke up further than my visual sense; the girl was no longer a vision to me, but a tangible being, and I understood, as a reasonable man, that I was in her punt. I apologised, my accent proved to her I was a foreigner. I explained I had become tired of fishing from the bank, and, seeing the punt moored near the shore, I appropriated it to my requirement, thinking it was for public use. I was polite, and the girl was led in the end to tolerate me; and we fished together from her punt, and conversed most pleasantly. We took many fish; then landed with them on the bank. As she was leaving me with a formal bow, I could not refrain from hinting, though I could not make use of the punt again, possibly I might fish from the bank the following morning. No fish ever took my bait more innocently. I was invited to share the punt the following morning. Three successive mornings I awaited the arrival of my new friend, and joined her whilst we fished; but she would not allow me to accompany her home, nor did I follow her to see where she lived; the rudeness would have been apparent and unpardonable. I had a presentiment that at the right moment I should know it well, or be glad to shun it. There was a sadness on that

young girl's face; but she chatted and won me, and, day by day, this fascination grew stronger. On the fourth day of our meeting, I had decided that she should settle my life's course between the choice I offered myself. On one side, should I respect my father's wish and devote myself to a home life and ease? or choose to use all my energies in devoting myself to benefit my country, and live for the cause that was deep in my heart? I had no need to speak; by accident, or by an intended act, I know not which, was revealed the truth of our position. I could love; I was free, but I knew I should be unloved, uncared for. The chill comes over me now, as I recall my surprise, as it crept over me at that moment. A hook became entangled in the girl's thick glove that she drew off her hand to extricate; then I saw that hand carried the badge of matrimony. I loved her devotedly, but I loved honour better. I felt sad; it was fate, and we must part for ever, and my life would not be blank. Possibly she knew nothing of my love—possibly, but I doubt it; but she smiled as I told her I should not meet her again, that I had altered my route, and would go to America instead of Ullswater. I went to America and served our party and cause by writing "Truth travestied," and trying to forget the romance in my own life. Forgotten I knew I was, but to forget—to wipe that winning face

from the mirror of my brain—was all impossible. I own my weakness. Men would tell me that I had been foolish—weak—an imbecile; even now I may be all, for last evening that girl, in all her beauty, came before me, and held me spell-bound—I looked upon the face again that influenced me so strongly at Windermere. In Portia were the same features and voice, the grace and elegance of movement and figure; then, as I gazed on her, I knew my love was unchanged, that I had yet to stifle and crush it. I saw my error. I turned my eyes inwards. I looked my mind well through; honour, discretion, and strength were there. My dear friend, you look concerned, but this second meeting has given me my remedy. Do I tire you?'

'No, Ossinman, you interest me. What is your remedy?'

'Ah! you may laugh at my mad panacea. I love Portia—the creation of a man's mind; she will be the divinity my love will hold as its religion. The girl of Windermere is no longer mortal, but Portia, when Venice was in her prime, walking in her streets and on her bridges. Time has claimed her, buried her in his casket, her ashes, as fine dust, may still be stirred by the wind. Thus my ideal lives, making me consecrate my whole heart to a harmless memory. Thus the ill-timed love grows to be my salva-

tion, and helps me to determine many half resolutions into definite plans. If my weak work has merit, I will double my strength to work entirely for our cause, and surrender all love and romance, except in fiction.'

Ossinman paused. Rimboff made no comment; but he still appeared ready to listen to further revelations from Ossinman.

'This is strange conversation for such men as ourselves to waste time over; perhaps every man loves once in his life to intoxication, and grows sober; but when sober, few men talk as I have to you, but your attention has invited my confidence and made me speak of the mystic spell Portia has, and will always have, over my actions and life. It was well that I went to Zankal's yesterday. I am now cured of all dissatisfaction, no indecision will lurk with me to disturb my mind in secret. All my energy, with free will, shall be thrown into the working of the machinery that is required to meet the varied complications of political struggles. I am grateful to you for listening to my follies; the ten minutes bestowed shall not be lost. I will work with greater energy to avoid that waste of precious time.'

'One question, Ossinman, before we settle to work. What do you know of Portia's antecedents?'

'Nothing. She came as from the clouds to

me, and I knew nothing of her until her voice awoke me from my dreams, and I saw her sitting in her boat resting on her sculls, as I have said.'

Rimboff made no further comment, and was satisfied by Ossinman's answer.

'Let us go to work now,' he said as he took up a packet of papers that bore a foreign postmark. 'Understand me clearly. Rimboff left England this morning for a cruise to Iceland. I—mark this—leave England in four days' time for Zürich, then you must fill my place in England.'

'May I ask why you wear the dress of a railway porter?'

'Even in England it is well that Rimboff should be little seen. I have met Nieff—his name speaks volumes to you. Yesterday I brought him here. My reason, you will ask. He was at Count Zankal's entertainment, and he was in the humour to follow me. The low-bred spy! He was going my road. I was alone, and he would drive with me. So he might. I found I should drive until I met the sea-coast before he would leave me; seeing this, I ordered to be driven here. I pressed Nieff by strong persuasion to enter and sleep here, and I intimated I should leave this morning for Iceland. He should not track me nor test me; I doubled on him. I asked him no questions, but gave him a bag of lies in answer to his many questions. I hinted that it was early yet for the

government to give any freedom to the press; that it was dangerous for the masses to become readers or talkers on the subject of politics, or the events of the day at home or abroad; that civilians should earn their bread, eat it in peace, and be thankful. I inferred that it was well to hide the sores of the State under plasters and bandages; to expose them to the people and the world on any pretext, was not only indiscreet, but admitting they had existence. It was politic to hide them away; time would exhaust them and heal them by degrees. I scouted as a nuisance, meddling writers, their journals, and sensational episodes; I admitted they were clever, but so mischievous that it was a duty to burn the works and rid the country of the authors. Nieff agreed with me, and he exulted in my remark, that, knowing how the sore was festering and growing corrupt under the plaster of silence, and bandage of despotic persecution, it would amount to folly in us to make this weakness visible, which, once disclosed would become so perceptible to every thinking mind, and be followed by remedies suggested by those who wished health in the State, and the cure would mean the fall of those in power, the ruin of us—I coupled his name with mine—for we receive money knowing it to be drawn from vile peculations, that were better kept dark. I spoke as Rimboff should, with a cer-

tain caution. He fancied he had Rimboff's last views, which proved enough for him, and he stopped in this house but a few minutes, satisfied in knowing where I had put up. Note down yesterday's date, and the incident of meeting Nieff at Count Zankal's house. Also jot down the name I am known by whilst here. I am Lakini, a Greek gentleman. I will take off my porter's dress when I have despatched some of my ideas recently written to their right destination. May they help our cause!'

'We have consecrated our lives to work out our cause, and Nieff shall not baffle our efforts. Every word and right principle that find an echo in the hearts of our people, are germs that may swell the force that ultimately will work out prosperity among them.'

Rimboff and Ossinman commenced a routine of work that lasted more than an hour, thus busily engaged, they became silent. Then Rimboff offered Ossinman a newspaper, saying,—

'Rest awhile, Ossinman. Our necessary work is done, and we are well in advance of post time. Here is to-day's *Times*, and in it are some piquant remarks on Russian matters.'

'Would I could see such a paper in Russia. What has the press done for Britain?'

'I will tell you. Made her noble, just, and prosperous by giving all the talent in the country power to ventilate opinions on every

side of a question that affects the interests of the country. Nothing is *ex parte* nor garbled, no mouth gaged in fear of the utterances of truth, for or against any proposition; no galling dread of suspension or suppression paralyses the hand in writing words fairly and firmly on any move made by the governing powers. The governing powers reap their benefit too from the press. All sores are laid bare, eyes of every shade may look into them; they may be probed mercilessly by bitter opinions, and handled by bold arguments, and in a multitude of counsellors is found the wisdom that will cure them. Some counsellors may be weak, nay foolish, but the weight of reason drawn from a nation's wealth of talent, must balance on the side of progress with a heavy thud. Mark well why Britain is strong, her people loyal, her word respected, and she acknowledged the pioneer of freedom, the friend of justice. Her great power is in her right doing, and in her free press that the nation values as a blessing, whilst the press abuses none of its privileges, and circulates information in the remotest colonies. What firm obstacles and difficulties we must overcome before we possess a similar luxury in our own country! Our work will have met some success, Ossinman, when our rulers are convinced by us, that civilisation grows only to perfection under the banner of freedom, and retrogrades, until it

withers, under the curse of oppression. Our people will grow contented and happy with a free press, and under a government whose worst acts will bear the fierce light of day, and comments made honestly and unfettered by officialism. When that time arrives, Ossinman and Rimboff will no longer need disguises, but as honest men, show themselves in their true colours, as patriots and men who have worked some good in their generation.'

'God grant we may live to see the beginning of good effects dawn on our work.'

'It will come,' said Rimboff as he threw over his porter's dress a cloak that entirely hid it, and he became a gentleman again. 'To be a porter longer might defeat my object. Possibly I shall appear in Zürich as a Savoyard until I meet my friends; so cunning takes the place of honesty, and deception gulls the despot's spies; their prey may often pass and repass the frontier unknown and unsuspected.' Rimboff added with a smile,—'I must not awake suspicion in this house; I will leave you, and rid myself of this dress, but will soon return to put some finishing touches to your romance to make it more pungent before publication.'

CHAPTER V.

THE MINERVA.

'God made the country, and man made the town,
What wonder, then, that health and virtue, gifts
That can alone make sweet the bitter draught
That life holds out to all, should most abound
And least be threatened in the fields and groves.'

COWPER.

VERA again became the fashion or craze of the day; she even crazed the heads of many who were too distant to see or hear her, for the eulogies that were heaped upon her in the general hum of conversation found echoes—oft repeated far away.

Lord Villeroy's theory had proved correct. Managers had the hardihood to suggest that it would be a golden time to many if Vera consented to join the profession.

Now was the time for Vera to make terms at her own price. She had never been avaricious until this moment, when she had to set a value

upon herself. The feeling that haunts the Oriental came over her—viz., if her price demanded was accepted, she would be sorry that she had not asked a higher sum. She was surprised at her greed, for hitherto generosity and the pleasure of acting had been sufficient motives to induce her to act, without regard to the standard of her merits as an equivalent to the value of gold received. She had accepted the terms that her mother considered fair; but now all was different. For these reasons she was avaricious. She had a husband disowned by his parent; a daughter who, at the caprice of her guardian, might return to her at any uncertain moment; a son whom she desired to rear with the advantages of education at a public school, and at one of the leading universities, and with an allowance suitable to a gentleman's requirements—all expensive items, when to be met by a moderate income. Vera was in the hey-day of her beauty; favour ran high; she was patronised by the highest and cleverest in the land; she must not make a false move and accept too low a sum. In Vera's temporary dilemma she appealed to Lord Villeroy to price her according to her value. This made him consult his lawyer, and his friend Davids, as to the profits made at the Cicero. Their accounts were to stand as a practical guide to a reasonable conclusion in the matter.

Vera consented to this test, but reminded Lord Villeroy that as the Cicero was opened for amateur and charity purposes, the prices for seats were higher than could be commanded by the hard test of profit made as a commercial undertaking. Lord Villeroy brought forward another argument, that the public only thought of the actress, and took no concern in the charity, and that her name would be sufficient inducement to fill the largest theatre existing.

The day of reckoning proved a result highly satisfactory; so satisfactory that its effect suggested a bright idea to the mind of Lord Villeroy. Acting on this idea, he worked out a plan, and, elated by success and unbounded hope, he sought an interview with Vera.

His face beaming with joy, caused her to exclaim,—'What news! Something less than a thousand a night?'

'I think I have swept away all the officious managers—if I have your approval.'

'What! Not concluded terms with one! I fear I have waited to meet a flap with a fox-tail; but come, cousin Ralph, I am not so foolish as I look. Tell me the price of my work. Time must not be lost; my advantages fly with it. I *must* make money quickly.'

'Just so, and I see the way. I have it clearly written out. For some reason known to the gods, but not to me, when I talk I forget the

pith of my argument, but when I am dumb and write, my difficulty is to write my thoughts as quickly as they come. I ought to rehearse everything I do.'

Lord Villeroy opened a leather bag that was filled with papers.

'If all those papers are connected with the little piece you are acting, we will read them together in my study, not in my drawing-room.'

'See, had I rehearsed my part, I should have known the scene should have been changed before I figured as a manager.'

Lord Villeroy followed Vera downstairs, saying,—'Davids has the management of all.'

'Pray never talk business on a staircase—always with closed doors,' said Vera in an undertone—an unnecessary caution in a house where letters were clandestinely opened.

'You have more wit than I. Spontaneously I never do the right thing. Not my gift.'

With closed doors the cousins discussed plans. Vera learned Ralph's idea. Every paper was read in the order it was marked. He went through the course, allowing no interruption from Vera, lest his plan would become a chaos, and unintelligible to her.

Vera did violence to her feelings, and held her tongue. She found her golden flowers must be plucked at the risk of many thorns.

Lord Villeroy proposed to take a large and

important theatre, the profits and whole benefit of which were to be Vera's. He showed her the plan of the building; he read long lists of figures that gave separate sums for the cost of every department, from the proscenium to the green-room; and the sum total made a high figure. He finished reading, and said,—

'Then there is that awful gas to be added.'

'What is the matter with the awful gas?'

'Gas touches my nerves. An over-heated theatre makes me dread fire; in my own theatre I should lose my head. Besides, I want to snuff out gas by electricity—but that is another scheme. Nothing in these papers bears upon it. Pray, no talking, or I shall get into confusion. Now, Vera, we come to the probable pay of the actors—a large item, with a good margin. Ah! now, the last paper—redecorating the house.'

'Dear cousin Ralph, I see you have been much in earnest, and it is cruel in me to say we must end this farce. Can I dream it possible to exist under such an incubus as a theatre's crushing weight upon me? Preposterous, ridiculous, and improbable, without a shilling in my pocket that has not its demand already clear. Let us stop here. You dread gas and fire; I dread more likely fatalities—law, bankruptcy, and ruin. Such results patent, I think it is madness to enter partnership in such a wild scheme.'

'It is no wild scheme, Vera. You have the talent, I have the money, and Davids will be manager; his name alone shall appear in the concern. I shall act under an assumed name —you shall choose it.'

'On the spot—"Dupe."'

Lord Villeroy's face fell suddenly.

'I am so sorry to extinguish the fire of your hopes with such a heavy splash of cold water. But the truth is well spoken out, and in time let us call a spade a spade. The last straw has done the business—decorating the house.'

'Done what business?' gasped Ralph.

'Made the scheme transparent. You are being duped, my good cousin.'

'Duped! I proposed the scheme. Davids and my lawyer put it ship-shape; just helped under my directions.'

'Well, Ralph, some people like to keep on the windy side of the law; there is always a choice in these matters. Remember you have money, and that is sometimes as difficult to keep as to make. You will not be the first good-natured man who has been fleeced.'

'What an idle fear. You are to make the fortune of the undertaking.'

'I! Then, Ralph, make yourself ready for the mischance of an hour. Where would the fortune be if I broke my leg or lost my health? No, no; you are being both fleeced and duped.

I will accept nothing but a salary from a manager—paid weekly or nightly—and no risk. The money shall not be earned by my talent and lavishly spent in glitter and paint, gorgeous scenery and dresses. I will name my price, and the manager of the theatre may get his profit for himself, or for tinsel and gewgaws, as he may choose. I am so sorry this goes for nothing,' and Vera glanced at the papers; 'but the first loss will be the least. Pay the lawyer's bill, and negotiate with a manager for me on these terms. Now comes the difficulty again staring me in the face as blankly as ever.'

Lord Villeroy put his hand on the papers that represented the practicability of his pet scheme so elaborately arranged before him; and, feeling confident of success, said,—

'I can clear that difficulty, I can indeed. Let me think it out, Vera; rehearse it, as it were, mentally.'

Lord Villeroy was some time putting down and casting up figures that roughly represented his private resources, and exactly showed the result of the profits on paper of the theatre.

'I have found a fair ending to my new idea —even you will approve it as feasible. Not a word yet or I shall be confused,' said Lord Villeroy, as he took pen and ink and drew up in a few words an agreement to pay Vera a weekly sum as a minimum, but when the profits

of the theatre were above a specified sum, then such profit was to be hers. He handed her the draft saying,—'Now, Vera, you are not treating with a man of straw. If I undertake to act according to that statement, will you let me be your manager? really sell your talent to me? I will take the risk of your fragile body, of broken limbs, and all the ills that flesh is heir to, and you shall, if in hospital, receive the sum named as when convalescent.'

Any Oriental, labouring under the fear of underpricing his ware to an ungauged, acute, or simple buyer, would have thought thrice before he refused so liberal an offer as that handed to Vera. Even under her fit of avarice she saw the agreement was good; that her money would be more certain if paid to her by a man holding broad acres than by one whose theatre profits formed his living; yet her answer was cautious and hard to a cousin who had her pecuniary interest at heart,—

'Mother shall decide if I can do better.'

Vera left Ralph to consult Madame Verge; she returned quickly with the ambiguous words upon her lips,—

'Mother says I am a nugget of gold.'

'She does not think the terms good enough. Can I alter them?'

Vera's Oriental humour did not rule her honesty.

'Improve them! No, cousin Ralph. I accept them as they stand.'

'Thank you! Oh, thank you! I will go to Davids—but stop.'

'Another rehearsal needed, cousin Ralph?'

'The effects of a previous one, Vera. A remark my lawyer made strikes me—that a paper is worthless unless signed. Your word is enough for me, but to make it plain to him and save me making blunders, accept my proposition by signing that paper in any way you like. Make any comment you think well that will complete this agreement to his satisfaction. You will stand engaged to me and have no partnership in the theatre.'

'I will not burn my fingers by touching one brick's value in the theatre, nor make myself liable as your partner in it. I enter into an engagement with you simply as a paid actress.'

'Undoubtedly.'

'I will read the paper again and sign it.'

Vera dipped her pen in the ink.

'We will read it together, Vera. I would not do this for any other woman in the world.'

'Tell me why you do this for me.'

'Because—'

'Because. Say on.'

'Because I love you.'

Vera looked grave, and as a natural movement of resentment put down her pen.

Lord Villeroy found he had acted a part badly and without rehearsal, and he tried to shift the scene and act another character to make atonement for indiscretion. He said, hesitating bashfully,—

'I am not going to make a long confession, but I do love your art—the dramatic art—and in consequence, I have a sympathetic love for a talented actress, so—so—I love you—and we can act together.'

Vera accepted the explanation. Plain to her mind was this fact: if she put the true meaning to Ralph's words that raised her resentment, an estrangement must follow; but should she treat him as a model of purity in thought and principle, and trust him as her best friend, and, whether right or wrong, construe his words to mean his love of the drama, she might raise him to the level of a standard that would make him a fit companion for her and all society. Thus deciding, Vera took up her pen and affixed her signature to the agreement, and gave it to Ralph, and as a *dernier mot* said,—

'Now, Lord Villeroy, this puts us on a correct business footing.'

'Yes, Mrs Morgane, it does,' said Ralph, treating Vera's coolness as a joke; but he knew he had played his game too openly by a false move for all that. 'We are professionals now, and out of the magic ring of the amateur company; that ring is broken by this last agree-

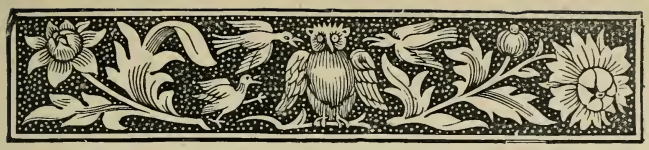
ment. Soon the "Minerva" will become my property, and I shall be but a paid actor.'

'Be careful, cousin Ralph! What will the *élite* say?' Vera spoke more kindly.

'Ask for passes and welcome me as of old. I intend, however, to have all pay and no favour. I am proud of my position!' Lord Villeroy replaced his papers in order in his bag whilst speaking. 'How I wish I could put the clock back. I must have advertisements placed in all the leading journals for to-morrow morning, and decide, please, are you to act as Mrs Morgane or Mademoiselle Verge?'

'Combine the names, so that I may be known by all friends. But why are you so worried and wild? You look as though lodgings in the moon would suit you. Generally so slow and sure, behold your aristocratic dawdle and languor are quickly lost in your new condition of an energetic, frantic manager.'

'Dear Will tells us to defer no time; delays have dangerous ends, and every minute of time is gold now, and vulgar haste my fashion until I have made sure of Davids and the press. I want to startle my friends before whispers spread false news. My resignation and present position shall reach them at the same time as the news of my new venture. Good-bye, I think we have fair prospects, and your fortune is as good as made.'



CHAPTER VI.

FAINT-HEARTED.

'Mystery magnifies danger as a fog the sun.'

COLTON.

RALPH lost no time in filling the Minerva with workmen. Italians for fresco painting, French for hanging draperies, etc., scientists to add modern improvements to benefit the acoustic and ventilating difficulties of the building. The means of cooling the theatre, as well as the head of the principal actor, were not easily worked out, and during this delay, Vera's courage was held on the tenter-hooks. The weight of the ponderous theatre grew almost insupportable to her; the maddening anxiety increased day by day, as she questioned her possible success and equally possible failure.

Vera had loved her art as a true actress, but it gave her a sharp touch of pain to act again; for her present had a past. Her memory would

cling to the cottage at Windermere, and all its loved associations that made home dear. She felt an isolated being among a crowd of enthusiasts; but a being who was to fulfil all the hopes centred in her; to be equal to all requirements, to be an automaton so perfect as to obey each pully without hitch or hesitation, to be ever smiling, pleasing, and pleased, to be the fascinating actress, but *never* the true woman.

Vera compared herself to the statue of a nymph, mounted high on a pedestal in the midst of a wood to give some artistic effect, such as the hart of the Hirschensprung; the breezes play about it, the storms thunder over it, the hail and rain pelt and drench it, the nymph smiles not, fears not, shivers not under all this tumult; no blush rises when admiration and praise are lavished loudly, because that nymph lives not, but is a work of art, and is marble.

So she had been raised on a pedestal as a woman of marble, indifferent to all her surroundings, because the joy had gone out of her life when Athelstan, in his early manhood, bruised in heart and bitterly disappointed in all his cherished hopes, had left her, and she had now become a work of art.

Many a pang had wrung her heart before it hardened to feel only love for money, and before she could train her very thoughts and gestures

to suit her changed condition, to smile when her tears were near, and laugh to hide her sorrow. Pained, too, to feel her nature turned to art, as pained as Polybius when he witnessed Roman soldiers seated on the ground playing with dice on the masterpieces of great painters, that took the place of tables. Art desecrated, surely, in one case; Nature as completely lowered, in the other.

Yet what could Vera do otherwise than she did? She must regulate her course to the condition of her peculiar position. She knew when the Duchess Distingué drove her in the park, or paraded her at a flower show, or through a picture gallery, or took her to a conversazione given by her dear friend the Marchioness of Haut-ton, it was her duty to smile, and be gracious, and aimable, thus to keep her place as the queen of the season, though one hour before she had cried bitterly over a letter from Malavita.

What but artifice and a marble heart could carry her through her day? Did she not expect a fruitful return to be made by cheering with a *bon mot* the many depressed hearts of the best and noblest of the land? Assuredly.

But there were moments when Vera threw aside her disguise, and her heart melted in its natural heat, and she felt all a woman's feelings, goodness, and unselfishness.

The last link that remained of home was Madame Verge, who had been too pre-occupied in other matters to continue to take the charge of her grandson. Little Athelstan was at school, maternal duties were undertaken by the wife of the schoolmaster, and he was to find companionship in his master's children, who were as young as the baby-pupil.

All ties of home were riven. Under these conditions it was natural that Vera regarded Ralph as her best friend. He had launched her into a new life among wealthy aristocrats. This brought extra expenses; her Cinderella clothes were turned into ball costumes at a considerable outlay, her receptions, though conducted with economy, formed an item above her means; still, to keep within the pale of society, she gave entertainments as a duty.

After many weeks the Minerva was clear of workmen. Vera, accompanied by Ralph, went to the theatre to suggest improvements or to approve those already made. She tried to keep a calm face, though in the midst of her anxious mind was a tumult of nervous fear.

Vera even felt a strange dread as she went on the stage boards, under the dingy rafters, and glanced at the chinks and crevices that let the white sunlight through in beams, in which specks of dust were flying hither and thither, as if they were living particles in joyous movement.

These beams made the undefined dusky light they pierced through more gloomy.

There was a strong smell of paint and varnish, of new wood, of oil, and of stale air that seemed impregnated with gas. Alas! how all this differed from the open expanse of Windermere lake, and the pure air that was being wafted into the cottage.

'I feel so nervous, cousin Ralph?'

'Oh, the traps are all bolted and safe, the light is uncertain, but step boldly, it is all right. The gas is to be lighted in a few minutes, then the house will look brilliant.'

How could Vera damp Ralph's enthusiasm? He misunderstood her; she would let it pass, and test her courage and strength again.

There was a splendour in the effect of the house now lighted at every point. Ralph was disappointed; not a word of praise was said by Vera; he looked at her, her very lips were ashen white.

'The smell of paint is too powerful for you, or perhaps your palor is the effect of gaslight on an unrouged face.'

'Neither, Ralph; my nerves are unstrung. My strength is not equal to carry out the venture I have undertaken. You will unnerve me more if you look with so much pity on me, for I pity myself so deeply.'

There was more than pity in Lord Villeroy,

for he had loved Vera before Athelstan had seen her. Would he not have given half his fortune to have sheltered her from rain as Athelstan had, if only he could have wooed and won her and made her Lady Villeroy; and did she not look beautiful in her nervous excitement?

'What makes you nervous Vera?'

'What? Do I not risk the fate of others in my success or failure?'

'Your success is sure. Praises are high everywhere; besides, you made a success at the Cicero."

'I shall be criticised more severely here than when I gave my time to benefit charities. I shall point my toes too much or walk too flat-footed; the waves of my hair will be too rough or too smooth; nothing will be too minute to escape notice. Already my re-appearance on the stage has given cause for jealousy, even among actresses, and I have read remarks that have pained me.'

'Mere straws on the stream; take no heed of them, you are the swan to swim through them and send them adrift. You had confidence when you accepted my terms, why have you lost it?'

'I had, Ralph, but my faith in myself has wavered since then; delay has become wearisome, and I have felt the balance trembling between—'

'Ah! between nerves and folly! Come, no

more wavering in faith, every one has faith in you. Impossible that the sheet-anchor of the whole venture can be drifting! No more trembling in the balances, please. See, I have some experts in acoustics coming to-day to test our improvements, and to note the power of your voice. We will look round meanwhile at the decorations of the house.'

'What an awful expense all this must be!'

'Awful fun! Now I see what bewilders you, you foolish creature. I have well balanced all expenses without trembling, and ready-money payments give me good discount. A profit at the outset.'

'False reckoning; as false as reckoning on me to fill this house.'

Ralph pointed out his old stall, saying,—

'I occupied that seat nightly, and never saw a thin house; to my knowledge, you packed it thickly enough, big as it is.'

'But under what different circumstances!' Vera put her arm over Ralph's to support herself. 'I was light as a feather then—now—Oh, Ralph! is there a chair near?'

'Poor thing! you do tremble.'

Ralph put his arm round Vera to prevent her falling.

'I am a little faint, that is all. I shall not faint—I never did in my life; only give me a chair.'

'A chair! a chair!' shouted Ralph. Nobody answered. 'All feeding, I suppose. Always feeding.'

Ralph took Vera in his arms, and seeing some packing-cases at a distance, carried her across the stage and placed her on them. The rough wood caught her dress, tearing the lace; he heeded nothing, except that Vera's face grew whiter and whiter, and became settled in a dead faint, and that no answer came to his call for help. At first he was dazed, for there was no shamming sick in Vera's state, and the success of the Minerva was centred in that beautiful pale creature who lay as a dead woman on the rough, impromptu couch. He kissed her lips; they were cold, dry, and rigid; no breath seemed to stir between them. He fetched one of the water buckets that were already ranged in order in the event of fire, and he used the means he considered would revive her. He bathed her temples, tore off her tight-fitting gloves, and every now and again kissed her lips, to test if they were less rigid. Happiness! The warm breath was stealing through them again in a deep-drawn sigh.

Minutes passed. Ralph whispered 'Vera;' her name uttered roused her, she opened her eyes.

'What has happened?' Vera inquired in a weak voice.

'Thank God, you are better.'

'Where am I?'

Vera could not recall to mind the strange nook in which she found herself.

'You merely fainted; you are all right now. You know where you are?'

'Yes. I know now—in that dreadful theatre.' Then Vera murmured in short sentences, 'Am I fit to be trusted? Have I over-rated my weakness? Can I support this house and all my cares? Failure means beggary for all. I will give it up, Ralph, I must give it up.'

'Now, Vera, you are a sensible girl, and I will not hear you sigh such a perpetual ring of rubbish! Give up, indeed! Keep silent on this packing case; it is empty, and may topple over if you move. I shall be back in a minute to take you home. Not a word of your illness must be whispered abroad.'

There Vera lay, as statuesque as a nymph at rest chiselled in marble; but she was now tormented with a woman's heart, and a brain racked with quick thoughts. 'Broken down, mind and body a blank; can this mean success? and putting gold into my hand. At any moment I may become a block—a log—and fail! I must be strong. A charity may draw, even if the money be paid away in gun-metal, for aught the sightseer care or know, but they must see some one worth looking at. But why did I faint?'

Vera ceased muttering, and thought out bitter thoughts. From them she found she had not gained the secret of crushing nature by art; her individuality influenced her far more than the adventitious circumstances that she forced upon herself. She had tried to trample herself to dust, and out of that dust form herself anew; she had failed—her original self would not be subdued. What was this greed for gold, all contrary to her nature? Was it worth the sacrifice of quietude and health to gain it? It was a hard bargain, yet what a privilege when acquired to make happy all depending on her; yes, this would lessen the degradation of bowing before the wealthy for wealth's sake, and seeming to be that which one is not, yet remaining ever true, honourable, and sincere to all good principles.

Whilst Vera was alternately slashing her mind and curing the wounds, her eyes were closed, to shut out the dingy corner she was in, and the dreary stage. She fell asleep and dreamed on that hard, high, rickety packing-case, that it would be a happy stroke of mercy if she slept away her life in that deep sleep. A gentle touch brought her from 'downy sleep, death's counterfeit,' before its depths had launched her on the shores of the land of mystery. Vera woke to find her spirit was fast bound to her troublesome body.

'You are better, Vera?' said Ralph, anxiously.

'What an age you have been away, Ralph.'

'Five minutes.'

'It seems five hours ago you left me; my mind has been jumbling together a medley of cause and effect, folly and wisdom, duty and impropriety. At last I felt I had closed my eyes for the last time, and I dreamed I was in heaven. I think I slept.'

'Fancy takes flights. But you are not going to die, and the acoustic arrangements are not to be tested; now this little *faux pas* can be a close secret. You have been living two days in one, and I take the blame. Now, leave P.P.C. cards to-morrow that will suffice for all the balls and dinners at which you are due. Now, let me help you to get off this packing-case. All is well but the lace on your dress. I must pay the damage. Not a word of this faint at home.'

Ralph lifted Vera bodily off the case; she tottered a little when on her feet. Ralph waited until she became equal to walk, resting on his arm.

'You understand—keep this illness secret.'

'If you wish that I should, I will. I am ready to leave.'

Mrs Burt bustled forward with an important air.

'La! madame, you are pale. The paint is

poison, let alone the bad air, which is equal pernicious. I know this stage well, the benefit of a good memory, and I just prowled in like, as the door stood open. Looking as you look, you had better be out in the air as soon as can be.'

'I am all right, Mrs Burt; but as you are here, I wish you to drive home with me.'

Vera was about to disengage her arm from Ralph's as she said,—

'Mrs Burt will drive with me.'

'Certainly, if you wish her company in preference to mine. But I will see you safely to my brougham.'

Mrs Burt and Vera drove together, and thus commenced the first foul spring of scandal, thin indeed at its source—but will it widen?

CHAPTER VII.

FELLBY AND BOSS.

'The way to Fame is like the way to Heaven—through much tribulation.'—STERNE.

FOR four years to run wild, to will, and do without the touch of bit or bridle, and as the fifth is wending its course, the shoes of duty again put on the feet, the check of rein felt that urges the course to a spot that the will would rather avoid, make the harness galling, the step fretful, and worries the victim; though the graceful play of action, the brave bearing of pain, gives deception to the whole. So Vera bowed and submitted her fair neck to the yoke that her destiny under the Fates placed upon it.

Once more Vera was *en route* to Windermere, there to breathe country air as a tonic to brace her nerves before she made her *débût*. In these hours of travel she thought out the events of her life, from her baby-acting to her short reign

of success; her journey over the same ground four years ago, when she loved her profession, and the country had little charm for her, and she was a whit sad to leave a splendid young fellow who would have made so handsome a Romeo, that her heart had been half-won over to love him. Then, brighter than this, came the remembrance of her marriage, of the short time replete with contented and happy days that had made the country a paradise and the stage an inferno. The hour of separation from her husband came vividly before her, and all the void and blank desolation that followed. In that one loss had the country become the inferno, but the stage had not been transformed into paradise.

Vera's companions to Windermere were her mother and Lord Villeroy, and in this trio was found a great contrast, and the greater part of the journey was made in silence.

Madame Verge had received no news from her husband since the letter perused clandestinely by Mrs Burt, and the date was drawing near on which she had promised to leave Vera and become his helper, and her reflections made her absent and sad. Lord Villeroy's mind was engrossed in a foolish notion that brought bliss to him. Malavita was doing its work—it had already hipped Athelstan; hope whispered,—'Patience, certain shoes may soon become vacant,'

and he felt he was winning his way to quickly fill these shoes, and fitting them to his own feet.

When Vera passed through the gateway at the end of the short avenue of Winander Cottage, she felt it difficult to face the sober, hard realities of life. This cottage in its beauty, so loved as her home, was but a memory not distant enough for time to have healed the pain of disappointed hopes. Tears were brimming in Vera's eyes.

'Cousin Vera, you are overtired and—'

Vera interrupted Lord Villeroy. 'Pray do not notice me, it is so ungrateful to you that I cannot be cheerful. I can imagine how you wish me at the bottom of the lake. I promise you to be merry to-morrow.' Vera tried to force a little laugh, but failed. 'Do not stop. Leave me now to my own devices.'

'What! alone and troubled?'

'Yes; please do. I will walk up this avenue alone. Go quickly and overtake mother.'

Vera did not leave her room that day. After entering it, and locking the door, she wrote a long letter to Athelstan, and then sobbed herself to sleep on a couch. The loud songs of the birds, that came through her open window, disturbed her sleep at early morning. She awoke cheerful and hopeful—the elasticity of youth was her friendly power, and the dread of future sorrows no longer haunted her. The

letter that lay before her reminded her that her husband had not gone to a land from which there was no return, and she might reasonably look forward to a happy future.

She looked out of window, and wondered why she had been so cast down, so utterly hopeless. 'All the wretched blues,' she murmured; 'but all things end, both good or evil. But will those imps appear again? Not if I can put up a barrier against them. What is the barrier to be?'

Vera's travelling dress reminded her that both in mind and body she must have been greatly overtaxed, or such a costume would not have clothed her at this moment. Overtaxed by the engrossing dissipation of exciting pleasures, added to the exhausting influences which attend a profession that compels its queen at one time to test her power in weeping, at another in laughing; then to love jealously, then to love nobly; to be enraged, to be passive in suffering, to be mad, to be pathetic—all and each as Nature would have depicted herself under trials, involving a study of nature, read by the actress's mind, so to render the acting neither beyond nor beneath Nature's requirements. This art acquired, brings success and applause. Applause is a stimulant; it engenders into existence a dangerous array of evils—not the least is the love of it. To act to gain applause—what

better pursuits does it hustle away to play well its own gambol in a life!

The warning had come, and Vera mentally determined there was yet time to prevent this stimulant becoming a necessary ingredient to life. From this hour she would put a barrier against the blue imps, give herself a counterpoise. Even a bright smile came to her face as she murmured, 'I will knit stockings for my two Athies, or some useful homely work for my house. I must find some time for natural play, even though I risk an additional bumper of wrath from those who find the queen of tragedy descend from her throne, drop her character, and incur a forfeit.'

Acting on her warning, Vera intended to pass this day as her model day of reformation, with two exceptions; she did not approve of sleeping as an Oriental in her day-clothes, nor the omission of laving in refreshing cold water. Yet, feeling that her costume and the morning air invited her to saunter out, she threw on her hat and refreshed herself in the breezy play of the wind that met her in the avenue. Away Vera walked in fresh vigour of mind and body, rambling past her dear old solitary paths, dreaming that Athelstan would again join her in them. The bent of her mind she followed freely; she was natural, as all geniuses must be; cheerfulness had returned to her, and she

was swayed by it, and she enjoyed her wild freedom, whilst her mind was creating schemes to give her a second life to her stage life.

Vera planned no route for her walk, and soon she found she was traversing an unknown road; still on she went, it would lead somewhere; it did—to Fellby.

Now Fellby possessed an hotel as well as lovely scenery, and as Vera had walked many miles, she had earned her appetite that fitted her to appreciate so genial an invitation to breakfast and rest. Vera entered the hotel.

Vera could never pass unnoticed; her height and movements attracted attention, and often comment. As she ordered breakfast, she did not intend that her manner should be studied, and she spoke in a low voice; nevertheless there was a low hum at a table at which sat four men, dressed for a walking tour, wearing thick boots, thick stockings, knickerbockers, and light jackets.

'Mrs Morgane here, and alone!' said one man.

'Oh, yes, certainly Mrs Morgane;' and the speaker adjusted his eyeglass as he spoke.

'Ossinman, you know Mrs Morgane. Be polite, and speak to her.'

Ossinman laughed low as he said,—'That would be an impertinence on my part, unless she first acknowledges me.'

Vera had an intuitive knowledge that she formed the subject of their talk, though not a word reached her ear, nor had the men looked at her beyond the rules of politeness. This knowledge did not disconcert her; her renewed spirit and her long walk gave her the zest to breakfast with an enjoyment and appetite that had long been denied her.

Her breakfast finished, she ruminated on the various countenances before her, making guesses as to their owners' dispositions, stations, countries, and counties. Among the variety of tourists were many habited in flannel, suitable for boating; others in riding dress; others, again, in dainty costumes for early promenade, possibly with the girl whom they had chosen as their future helpmate in life. Vera engaged her mind in a scrutiny of characters, as clothes, style, and countenance might indicate, yet giving margin to her play of fancy that the wearers of these free-and-easy costumes were often encased in uniforms, civil or military, and her mind suggested even some had dropped titles, that the owners might be more as God, and less as man, had made them, consequently more in accord with Nature.

The visitors' book was put before Vera by the landlord, who thus disturbed the thread of her thoughts.

'Is that necessary? I only breakfast here.'

'I should esteem it an honour if you wrote your name, madame.'

Vera felt she was recognised, and complied with the request; inquired the distance to Boss, and ordered her bill.

Whilst thus engaged, the four men, equipped for walking, left their table, and when near her, Vera recognised the young Russian, and he acknowledged her bow *en passant.*

'Be proud you are not forgotten. Mrs Morgane's wonderful eyes form her beauty,' said one of Ossinman's companions.

'Think so? To my mind her classical nose and forehead are matchless,' said another.

'Her feature is her mouth,—her smile is perfect in symmetry. I am a bit of a sculptor, and among five hundred beauties, not one will have so perfect a mouth as Mrs Morgane's,' said the man who looked critically upon most faces he met that had some beauty in them.

'Say you no word of praise, Ossinman?' said the first speaker.

'Yes, one. Her heart is more beautiful than her face,' said Ossinman, as he thought she might have played with his heart, but did not.

'I like to look on a pretty face. What care I for a heart, unless that heart is given to me?' said the first speaker. 'What? you return to have a quiet word with the reigning beauty!

No; you have left letters. Let me be an eye-witness to that truth.'

'Certainly,' replied Ossinman.

Ossinman and his companions re-entered the room, and found Mrs Morgane in a state of perplexity. Ossinman took the letters off the table hastily. Mrs Morgane was still in some dilemma, looking on and beneath the table, and feeling in the pockets of her travelling dress. He proffered his assistance.

'Could you lend me a sovereign? I have no money, and it will be an act of charity! I will return it to you to-morrow. Are you stopping at this hotel?' replied Vera to his offer.

Ossinman said he was stopping at the hotel, and he would pay the bill. This offer contented Vera; and after she had thanked him, he left the room without further parlance.

Vera then continued her walk to Boss.

A smiling landscape lay before her of true English type. No frowning gorges, no severe, barren mountains nor gigantic crags and rocky peaks; nothing grand to entice the Alpine climber, or lover of adventure and the eternal snows of the glacier regions. Not even the dark gloomy pines formed a feature in it, though here and there stand out a group of pine firs that blend well among the brighter leaf of emerald green; yet this landscape has a magnificence all its own, but it is composed of soft

tones, beautiful in colouring. Verdure clothes the hill slopes and valleys; sheep graze on the rich pasturage, and pay tribute by giving their thick fleeces to their owners.

Vera found the path steep, as one hill when mounted brought another in view; but she toiled on, and at length began to descend. She gained the carriage road, and there met some gipsies. At the moment they were resting, and surrounded by the usual accessories when travelling — carts, horses, with and without harness, feeding on the grass, and numberless dirty, well-fed children.

'What a delightful way to roam about the world!' was Vera's muttered exclamation. A burst of joy at her freedom, and the cessation of the mechanical labour required in her profession wherein to please without being pleased, made her mind undergo as many painful contortions as the body of an acrobat being bent to his trade.

'It is a pretty scene,' thought Vera, as the men and women placed themselves about in detached groups, whilst halting to feed on the provender they had picked up—they might consider honestly—in their travels; for they were children of the earth, and inheritors of its abundance. There was a smell of mutton in their broth, an appearance of chicken in their pies, and the fresh fruit seemed but just plucked.

Vera passed through this halting party—its picturesqueness seemed to fascinate her. She seated herself on a high mound a little distance from it, and watched the scene. How greatly she admired it as a broad scene in nature, not cramped on a boarded stage; the wild people living a wild life they were born to, and fitted to lead.

'How they must enjoy freedom. Ah! what dull routine is in store for me. Yet, I must with a smile accept my life's trials for gold; to amass a treasure that is not synonymous with health and joy—ay! a treasure that lures even nations to battle to gain; and these sturdy, joyous gipsies have neither gold nor silver, and are happy! And after all, is it not happiness that all the world strives to attain?' Here the thread of Vera's ruminations ended.

Standing before Vera was a slim, tall, beautifully-proportioned woman, her limbs moulded and round as those of the finest work of Greek sculpture, her step elastic, and movement graceful with the suppleness of youth; her small, well-formed feet were shoeless, but were not unduly spread by walking; at any sacrifice there was always room for Pipeta in the caravan, and thus her foot and ankle maintained the symmetrical parts that the fashion of boot-wearing defaces. Under the shade of the cart her complexion had become clear and bright, but not sunburnt.

This gipsy girl was following her trade of fortune-telling. Vera refused to have her future read; she listened to the girl's chatter as she was pleased with her loveliness, the radiance of her sparkling eyes that seemed to emit a light of their own. She was lost in admiration of the uncultivated weed that the free hand of Nature had impressed with so much beauty.

The gipsy girl could not cajole the young actress out of money; she had none to give her.

'What is your Romany name?' asked Vera.

'I am a Herne, and my registered name is Pipeta. Now, what is your name?' said the gipsy girl.

'Vera Morgane. How I should like to live with you, or rather, as you live.'

'You must be a Herne to live with us, but you might follow us; but better you should not, for it is not always fine weather. Have you lost your way?'

'No, Pipeta. I am resting.'

'You will lose something you love.'

'I love nothing, Pipeta.'

'Yes, Vera Morgane, you love your daughter, and she is dying.'

Malice prepense was clear in these words. Pipeta had talked much, but had not gained money.

'I attach no weight to your idle words, still I think them very harsh; and, Pipeta, I fancied

I read a kinder disposition in your eye than the cruel one you have shown. Come, here is my brooch, it is of little value; but you must recall the ill-luck you have predicted.'

'Your daughter is dying, but of the same name you shall have another.'

Well satisfied with the brooch as the price of a few thoughtless words, Pipeta walked off with it and joined the Herne clan. So friends and foes meet on this round world; strangely devised circles bring them in the same pathways from remote distances. The gipsy girl who predicted the death of Hephzibah Morgane was within close ties of relationship with her. How related an eccentric path yet untrod may disclose.

It was a lonely road that now stretched out before Vera. Uninfluenced by the loneliness, she walked happily on until she reached Boss, weary and tired.

At Boss there was a railway station, and a train was ready to start that would stop within a mile of Winander Cottage. Vera entered a carriage, stated she was travelling without money, gave her name, that had a charm, and her address.

Her early constitutional walk had led her too far from home to accomplish the walk back; the train helped her out of this difficulty, and would land her in good time near the cottage. So man proposes.

The train started, but many hours passed before it reached the station near the cottage. It came to a standstill. Vera inquired the cause of stoppage. The reply was vague. The train in advance obstructed the way; some slight accident; but no information was forthcoming as to its nature.

Vera's train was in a deep cutting, and at the entrance of a tunnel, and no one could leave it. Vera being assured of her safety, ensconced herself in a comfortable corner in the carriage and fell asleep.

It was late in the afternoon when Vera reached the cottage, and her long sleep had revived her strength. Finding Madame Verge and Lord Villeroy out, she sauntered into the garden, looked in the greenhouses and forcing-pits. The melons were numerous and fully ripe. She remarked to the gardener that they should be cut.

'Them melons are only fit for the pigs, ma'am.'

'For the pigs! Pigs fed on beautiful melons!' Vera said in surprise, and she thought, 'Would the man be guilty of misappropriating such luscious fruit to the mean purpose of nourishing a pig's body?' and she said doubtfully, 'I question if a pig would eat them.'

'Only give them the chance.'

Then, gardener, they shall not have the chance. I will find some way to make mummies of them.'

Vera sought Mrs Burt, who knew the mysteries necessary to conserve and dry melons; and it was not long before the melons were plucked, carried under the old carved porch, and Vera was sitting on the bench, and there, under Mrs Burt's instruction, she cut the fruit into slices, preparatory to conserving them.

Vera was amused in watching the dissatisfaction and consternation of the gardener. All this fruit was destined for market, for the gardener had found to his profit that Lord Villeroy was a perfect gentleman, and cared to see nothing of the 'rubbish' that was grown here, or at his big place in Cheshire, when he could get good fruit from Covent Garden. *Query*, Did he ever buy his own fruit?

Vera became chatty with Mrs Burt, and spoke of the little incident touching the gipsies. Mrs Burt's attention was much excited.

'Tachipen, tachipen! You met a Herne? Did Pipeta look deeply into your eyes?'

'Whilst we talked we looked at each other, and Pipeta's eyes seemed to look deeply into everything, they had so great a brilliancy.'

'You offended her, ma'am; but she has no power over your child. I fear for you, but I know—I know.'

'Know what?'

'Well, I know what I know, and only myself shall know.'

Mrs Burt left Vera hurriedly.

Vera continued her employment under the broad old porch, and thought no more of the gipsy or the misfortune she had predicted, nor of Mrs Burt. Her brain was filled with matter of more importance, yet her hands were busy in preparing her intended mummies.

Vera sat long, looking so bright with her fruit scattered around her; and as she thought over the day's adventure, her mood changed often, from thought to a broad grin of laughter, which, in the art of painting, only a Murillo could do justice to the play of features. She sat until a weird twilight darkened the porch, a slight veil of mist dimmed the outline of the hills, and gave to the lake an appearance of increased expanse.

Vera began to realise the hour was growing late, and to wonder why her mother and cousin were so long absent, when suddenly Tragedy broke in upon Comedy, startling both the masks, but each maintained a rigid demeanour.

Tragedy, with sobs between each word, 'My child! my darling! my life! Oh! where have you been?'

Comedy. 'Not to London to see the Lord Mayor, but to Boss out yonder to see the gipsies. But where have you been, sweet mother?'

Tragedy, not liking the levity and smile on Comedy's face, put her hand on her child's

brow; the brow was cool. 'I have been looking for you, my child. What are you doing, my poor Vera?'

Comedy. 'Perparing to make mummies of these melons, to save them from being devoured by swine.'

Tragedy. 'Oh, my poor over-wrought child, I am afraid— Where is Mrs Burt? You must not be alone.'

Comedy. 'Mrs Burt may be preparing the spices and candies for my mummies; but I do not know.'

Tragedy, coaxingly. 'Let us go together to find her.'

Comedy. 'Why together? and to find a being that is not lost? This bell will bring her, or somebody who will fetch her.' (Comedy rang the bell in the porch.) 'Sit down, mother, and help me in my work. Is not that flesh a beautiful pink?'

Tragedy shuddered visibly. 'How will this end?'

Comedy. 'Time alone will tell. Sometimes they dry well, sometimes they fail, but should this fail—see, it is very juicy—then "lay her i' the earth; and from her fair and unpolluted flesh may violets spring!" One daily finds nothing is lost in Nature, not even a mummy that fails to harden.'

Tragedy looked alarmed and became speech-

less. Mrs Burt, in her usual flurried manner, brought a dainty-looking sweetmeat, wrapped in a paper on which unintelligible signs were written.

Comedy. 'Is this some of the spice and candy for me to taste?'

Mrs Burt. 'Taste it first.'

Comedy eats the sweatmeat. 'There is no flavour in it. That spicing will not do.'

Mrs Burt. 'It will. Not for worlds would I have that remedy fail: for years I have kept it for myself, but to save you I deny myself.'

Comedy. 'Remedy! What is it to cure?'

Mrs Burt. 'The evil eye.'

Mrs Burt walked away with dignity. Comedy was in an ungovernable fit of laughter. Tragedy trembled in fright. Walking up the avenue were Lord Villeroy and another gentleman. Tragedy showed signs of relief at seeing them, and under great distress found power to speak,—

'My child, my dear child, calm yourself. Here is your cousin and a Russian gentleman.'

Comedy. 'How can I swallow a remedy against the evil eye given me with gravity and not laugh! Gulled by superstitious nostrums, so easily too, whilst I thought I was to taste the sweet spices prepared for my mummies.' Again a paroxysm of irrepressible laughter attacked Comedy. Lord Villeroy, in undertone, speaks to Tragedy. 'Where has she been?'

Tragedy. 'Roaming to Fellby and Boss.'

Lord Villeroy put his hand on Vera's shoulder to steady her merriment, as he questioned her anxiously. 'Where were you roving all last night?'

The key to the mystery was there. Vera understood immediately that her unimpressed bed and absence had led to some mistake.

'Roving all last night! Why, I slept so soundly, no earthquake would have shaken me awake, but in the morning I sauntered out, went to Fellby and Boss, then took train to Windermere. Now is the most sensational part of my day's work—a railway accident! My train detained many hours. I slept soundly through them, and now here I am, saving your melons from the pigs by preparing them for conserving, and the last important move I have made, is told briefly. I have just swallowed a remedy against the evil eye, for I fell in with some interesting gipsies. Now, Ralph, in these days of quickness, I have done in one day quite enough to be legally detained, by the consent of my friends, in a private—mark, a private—lunatic asylum. There is but one obstacle, rich people pay well for that privilege. I am not a large enough nugget yet. Truth spoken, you have mistaken my condition. Now, tell me what you have done this day worth the doing.'

'Oh! nothing. We have been too frightened

about you. But when we found you had been to Fellby from your friend, we—yes, we—'

'Not another word, Ralph; you have not rehearsed your part. Mother, have you done anything?'

Tragedy put on the mask of farce.

'Not much, but we intended to do more—drag the lake, that was all.'

Still there was truth in the remark, for excitement had reached an unreasonable height when Ossinman was met by Lord Villeroy and questioned, and Vera's description of face and dress stated. Mrs Morgane tallied with the description, and Ossinman told his tale.

The unreasonableness of walking at so early an hour, the forgetfulness shown in eating breakfast and having no money to pay for it, everything connected with this strange freak awoke a grave suspicion in the minds of Madame Verge and Lord Villeroy. Vera's nervous depression, the strain suffered for many months, and her words that Ralph might wish her at the bottom of the lake, because she was gloomy — truly thoughtless words—but all were construed to mean much that created fears not able to be subdued.

'Now, good people, you all thought I had gone mad. I am sorry to have so misled you and dragged you up to agony point; that is a point one never rests at for long when reached,

for it is well to think even our trouble might be worse; let this gradually blunt the sharp pang. Thank you for all you have done. Now congratulate me on being *compos mentis*. How fearful! if I were to lose my health of mind, and before I grow into a nugget, too! I have failed to recognise my friend in need all this long time.'

Vera rose, intending to welcome Ossinman, whose name was still unknown to her.

'Finding you are safe, I will leave you, and hasten to join my friends,' Ossinman said, as he bowed a formal adieu.

'Our little debt,' said Vera hurriedly.

'Your husband has defrayed that, thanks.'

'My cousin,' said Vera, uncertain if Ossinman heard her, he left so quickly. Lord Villeroy accompanied him to the end of the avenue, and laughed over their past anxieties.

Vera's model day had proved ridiculous as a precedent, yet it was a day that would influence her future life. She ended it in her usual task —a letter written to Athelstan. Another letter, written in a jocose style, she posted to Lady Clara, and she left the melon conserve to be perfected by Mrs Burt's hands. So ended the day, but the effects of the trivial incidents that marked it lasted for many days.

CHAPTER VIII.

ROMANY.

'Tis one thing to be tempted,
Another thing to fall.'—SHAKESPEARE.

'It is hard to personate and act a part long; for where Truth is not at the bottom, Nature will always be endeavouring to return, and will peep out and betray herself one time or other.'—TILLOTSON.

GREAT is the value of hearty sympathy. It acts as a cordial that exhilarates and yet soothes. Left without its support, how many clinging natures would pine, droop, and despair! It was Lord Villeroy's aim to be the staff on which Vera should find strength. He knew a panacea to rectify all evils attendant on despondency; in a word, horse exercise. A good canter cured him of *ennui*, why should it fail to cure Vera? Thus as a quack he reasoned, and the sequel to this reasoning was the purchase of a beautiful young Arab, sleek and high-spirited.

No subject could have been of less importance to the general public than Lord Villeroy's gift of this Arab to Vera. A ring of a single gem might have been of greater money value, and possibly given with a less pure motive, but not attracting attention, it could not have raised the silly talk, as this noble beast did, that was to bring health and spirit to a plodding being, and act as a palliative to the toilsome work of stage life. Yet

> 'That abominable tittle tattle,
> The cud eschewed by human cattle,'

raised the venomous old serpent. It hissed lies, and invented a miserable, cunningly-devised tale, half true half false, wholly malicious. The noble-minded gave no heed to it, but the weak accepted it as gospel truth, and, with heedless tongues, hurried on the hurtful words without compunction or stint, league after league, whilst the principal actors who innocently caused the stir of tongues knew nothing of the malice afloat, in time to stop the blighting influence it cast around them.

The gift was a surprise to Vera, and she accepted it with grateful pleasure.

'I will call my new pet Allah; his eye is all love and intelligence,' said Vera, stroking the Arab's arched neck.

'The mysterious old Turk you sometimes

laugh about would not approve your choice; indeed, it is a name that should be held sacred.'

'You are right, Ralph; yet I am unlikely to fall in with that very mad Turk. I will strike Allah out of the list. Let him be Romany, to commemorate my rencontre with the gipsies, they have the Arab instinct in their roving life; or shall he be Ab-del-Kadir?'

'Romany; a full, round name, the reverse of Ab-del-Kadir—that sounds weak on the lips.'

'Then he is Romany, thus christened.'

Vera kissed her Arab's face. Afterwards she was guilty of a little levity in patting Lord Villeroy's arm in playful affection, saying,—

'Ralph, you are too good to me. Have you no other friend to favour with such gifts?'

'Many who would accept them, Vera, but none on whom I would bestow them.'

'I am doubly favoured, and doubly grateful.'

Lord Villeroy was a true Englishman, full of energy, and when there was something to give sport, to hunt or kill, he loved the country, but found it dull when the corn was high and every inch of land was visibly doing some duty to provide for the wants of man; now Vera wrecked his *ennui*, and if he found nothing to be cruel to, he had filled the void by finding somebody to be kind to, and who could give him amusement.

Vera and Lord Villeroy soon found them-

selves side-by-side cantering on the road to Boss. Vera suddenly brought Romany to a walking pace, and said,—

'As you possess wealth, Ralph, I have been thinking over reasons that make a difficult problem—why you accept the drudgery of acting, and busy your brain in manufacturing yourself into an actor.'

'What conclusions have you formed?'

'I cannot form one.'

'I will for you. I must have another object in life beyond counting my wealth. I might be happy in idleness: I doubt it. That supposed luxury could sway me only so long as I needed rest. But, Vera, I possess some amount of imagination, I fancy also refinement in taste, as well as depth of feeling. Of course, there is care necessary to acquire the technical aids to acting, but this drudgery is a source of joy to me, and I warm into the life of the character played—even a bad character has a charm. I must have a more exciting influence in life than eating the daily bread that my forefathers provided for me.'

'Such as this morning's gallop over the hills and far away.'

'I gave you Romany to counteract excitement—possibly I have but added more to your peaceless nature.'

'This excitement means health. The excite-

ment that wears one is working hard and fearing neglect when one's vanity has a greed for admiration; an excitement that makes one's pulses quicken, but gives no tone in return. Now, Romany's gallop quickens my pulse, but my brain has free play, a healthy excitement that brings peace.'

'That is a blessing!'

'But we are truants to gain it, and we have some work yet to do. How is my death decided? My *débût* is near.'

'Death!'

'Yes; am I to meet it as Katherine, Desdemona, or Juliet? I am well prepared, but my dresses still lack the finishing touches, and the queen's dress will not do duty for night or grave-clothes. We must have no amateurish management; and remember, Ralph, to be well rehearsed, for when I am tragic I cannot stop to put you right, but I shall be conscious of an error on your part, and that knowledge may make my muscles work into a smile instead of a woeful grief. I shall wholly grow into Katherine, Desdemona, and Juliet, and love you as the monster Henry, the deluded Othello, or the handsome Romeo; yet I shall hate you as my cousin if you do not act your character to perfection. It is not easy to me to act well when I dislike my stage lover, and feel no sympathy in him.'

'Vera, I am striving to gain your love at every step I take; that is my life's object. My acting shall not displease you if it is within my power to overcome my faults. Yes, Vera; I love you with sincerity, and when my love is well timed then will come hope.'

'It is well you have not rehearsed that little speech, cousin, for had you, you would "have blown this coal betwixt us" that would have prevented our walking this world's stage together until blest with old age, "*sans* teeth, *sans* eyes, *sans* taste, *sans* everything." Indeed, you must apologise!'

Vera might have added, had the words flitted over her brain, as they did in principle, 'Now do I play the touch, to try if thou be current gold, indeed,' so imbued were her thoughts and memory ever with the words of her long-loved poet; words, to Bacon's high mind, that ever 'come home to our business and bosoms,' and that seemed as much Vera's property as the letters that form the alphabet.

Ralph reproached himself that he had not been silent on the subject of his wild dream, but he must mend the breach he had made in his manners, to prevent a miscarriage of his plans. How could he cut the clumsy knot in which he had entangled himself? Vera looked so serious that he would have hidden himself in his boots, if he could, to escape her displeasure.

Help came. He must be prudent, was his first thought; second thought, he must not apologise; third thought suggested these words,

'The *summum bonum* of everything is sincerity and truth. Outspoken truth that springs to the tongue unwittingly may be dangerous, yet treachery never exists in company with it. I esteem you, Vera, in all honour. I love you as one worthy to be revered for your purity, courage, and nobility of mind. I may love you so. Our poet says, "Love all, trust a few, do wrong to none." Now, Vera, we can understand each other; and my accident of birth makes us relations, so we may put aside the conventional formalities of acquaintances, be as of one family, and bound by the ties of kindred love. Am I forgiven?'

'Cousin Ralph, I sue for forgiveness,' said Vera, for the touch satisfied her that Ralph was golden. 'I test, analyse, and weigh characters so much in my studious moments, while I study intention and disposition as the causes of action. When out of harness I fear I do the same, but I have weighed with a false balance this time; it is adjusted now. Understand, Ralph, my peculiar position makes me jealous of my good name. In me Athelstan has centred his faith; possibly, in my sensibility to be worthy to merit his trust, I deem myself disloyal if I hear the whisper of a thought that would cause

ruin to the happiness of one who is my very soul.'

Lord Villeroy might have been cured of his senseless infatuation by Vera's words had Athelstan not been in Malavita, where his death must be early; but her words had a contrary effect upon him, for she grew more noble in his eyes, more deserving of his love and the self-sacrifice he was making for her sake,

> 'He knew what's what, and that's as high
> As metaphysic wit can fly;'

he had found her golden indeed, as she had considered him.

'Now our cousinship is cemented with a friendship that may live with us to ripe old age; but we must not forget the world has envious eyes ready to find flaws where none exist, so, Ralph, having no misunderstanding between us, we can brave their scrutiny. In all this talk I have not heard how I am to die at my *débût*—the all-important question, since we have arranged the question of hearts. Romany, if you had speech, what a breath of scandal you could spread—enough to raise a storm not easily quelled.'

'I understand all you would say, Vera; our position is one of trial—a trial the weak would deem fraught with temptation, but self-respect and its good influences can give us peaceful

consciences beyond the reach of the envious to militate. Brave in ourselves, we will bear our daily life courageously, even though our foes may try to mar it.'

'It strikes me, cousin, you can talk well enough when you wish, without rehearsing; no finessing again. Now to business.'

Vera and Ralph were soon engaged in professional talk, and came to several decisions on grave matters as they rode through Boss.

On the road were two horsemen, Ossinman and his friend Malton, an artist. Lord Villeroy spoke to them, and the conversation ended in an invitation to Winander Cottage. Ossinman refused it, but Mr Malton joined Vera and Lord Villeroy in their ride home.

Mr Malton carried in his head a store of knowledge of art, taste, and colour, and a tongue that never tired of talk, not conversation, for he seldom listened. From him Vera learned that Athelstan had made more than daisy chains, and Lady Clara more than bead rings, in their early days together, and that he had painted Athelstan's likeness for a gift to Lady Clara.

'You infer there was an engagement between them. Am I right?'

'Oh yes! There was some sort of engagement, but Lady Clara was very young then. I never heard why it was broken off. Such

things form the usual course of life—a quarrel, or the love dies out, or some money troubles often upset marriages. Here am I a bachelor, but I have tried to struggle into the bonds of wedlock six times; now, people seldom meet with my luck. Jilted twice when I was poor; one girl turned nun because her parents thwarted our marriage, and she refused to elope with me; another girl I found had a will of her own, expressed in harsh tones, so I gave her up, and all her money, which was considerable. My fifth engagement lasted one year, and death ended it. My sixth is pending, and it will be a strange union if it ends in marriage. Now, Mrs Morgane, you must let me advise you in matters that are above the skill of milliners—what colours you should choose. I have so much esteem, I may say love, for your husband, that my interest is keen in all that concerns him.'

Vera talked of silks and satins with an appearance of pleasure and interest, whilst she was haunted by the knowledge that the beautiful Lady Clara had been Athelstan's first love. Such might be the usual course of life; and she tried to crush jealousy, and feel calm, yet knowing that Lady Clara and Athelstan were in close correspondence to this day, and she remembered the influence Lady Clara had over Athelstan, and this memory disturbed her peace.

CHAPTER IX.

ANXIETY.

'Death, so call'd, is a thing that makes men weep,
And yet a third of life is pass'd in sleep.'—BYRON.

OOKING out of window at the Crane Hotel, Fellby, were two men, who were passing an hour in idleness—that is to say, if Mr Malton's rapid talk could be called an idle pastime, as he told Ossinman how he had decided all details connected with Mrs Morgane's *débût*. How he had 'trotted' both Vera and Ralph through their paces, and found they excelled in a canter down Love Lane, and a general smash-up at Death's Door; how brilliant must be the *débût*, and much more so the same effect, and he ended in saying, 'Can give you a seat in best position. Five minutes will suffice to make you madly in love with the fair *débutante*. Say you will accept the seat.'

The attic urbanity shown by Ossinman allowed Malton to talk unchecked until he came to the inevitable full stop, caused by a roopy cough.

Ossinman replied,—

'My love brooks no rival, Malton, and it claims the devotion of my life, but no woman holds it; and again, I have the sagacity not to incur the penalties paid for present pleasure that rob life of peace.'

'Think you that plays are guilty of such a crime? Old Pericles thought so well of plays that he made the public treasury pay for free passes for poor citizens. In our present degraded state, our managers give passes to the rich at their own loss. The Minerva proves to have prestige; and royalty, nobility, mobility, and rusticity will all struggle for best places at any price. Come, Ossinman, are you the wise or foolish man of the world? Not care for plays! when you write fiction by the hundredweight and hunger to write more. By all the imps and angels, no more writing for you, no more brushing or filing for me! A carriage stops. Madame Verge and Mrs Morgane get out. Of course they are our visitors.'

'I am true to my little Nixe, Malton. I dare not pass more idle moments, or she will not be true to me.'

'What! off! Stop! Villeroy is solemn.

What a face that is to tell its own tale! What an infatuated man, and he fancies his nonchallant manner deceives his friends. La, la! Ossinman, you shall have the refusal of that seat, I— Well! that eccentric man leaving me to talk to the wind; no, the window this time.'

As Malton turned, Lord Villeroy entered the room.

'Something wrong, Villeroy?' said Malton, as he took his visitor's hand.

'Villainously wrong.'

'The Minerva burnt down?'

'Not yet. The wrong is of a domestic character, but—'

Malton interrupted Lord Villeroy, as he playfully thrust a dig in his ribs.

'I thought you were playing the lover a little too openly, and—'

'Stop, Malton, I imagine nothing.'

'Probably I am not to interest myself in the domestic wrong. Look out; that gipsy girl now passing is my model; her hands and feet will make my fortune. There they are in plaster, and her face is as true a type of beauty when painted fair or dark. I have made many sketches. Let me show them. What! not now! By the way, I have not heard your domestic calamity in detail. I hope nothing serious.'

'Serious enough. Mrs Morgane's daughter,

adopted by my aunt Lady Clara Scott, lies at the point of death in Italy. If the child dies, Ver—Mrs Morgane could not act—too sensitive—and at the end of a fortnight the Minerva is advertised to open.'

'Keep the death dark. One wants no heart, only nerves of iron, to cope with life and work a success. Just keep it dark until after the *débût*.'

'Intercept letters—scarcely possible. Mrs Morgane and I have agreed on a plan. What will make it worth your while to join me in London?'

'Nothing. I have my gipsy girl and quietude here. But what do you want of me?'

'I am a little foggy about what you are to do. I want to add your refinement in taste to Davids' practical work, and to sweep away the host of small people he employs. I want you to carry out with me the principles of effect. Do you understand me? Not the mechanical part, but ideas and first thoughts—the *something* startling, yet appropriate in scenic effects, and that something must be original and good enough to make half London say to the other half, Have you been to the Minerva? I must prepare for a possible calamity; and next to good acting, the public take to splendid trappings and scenic effects. Your good taste is worth a fortune at this moment.'

'No bad thing, 'pon honour! But I must

think over price, and how valuable or worthless my services may be to you, and how much of my time you may require. Taking into consideration the time I idle away, I may come to the conclusion to serve you *con amore*, without adding the vulgar item of money to our contract. To-morrow you shall know.'

'A thousand thanks. Write to my London address, for to-morrow I and my guests leave Windermere.'

'But my gipsy!'

'Hang her before she upsets our plans.'

'Too handsome to hang except as a picture. Let me show you the sketches I have made of her.'

'Another time. I am keeping friends waiting,' and Lord Villeroy left before Malton's long tongue was again stopped, not for the want of ideas, but by exhaustion of strength and noisy cough.

Lord Villeroy overtook Madame Verge and Vera, who walked on the road to Boss to while time during his interview with Malton.

'We have just met the gipsy girl,' said Madame Verge, 'and Vera is half inclined to believe in the power of the evil eye and second sight, for she foretold the illness in Italy of little Hephzibah.'

'Oh!' said Lord Villeroy, 'Malton's model;

he will exorcise her, and cure her of looking into next week and into Italy too.'

Vera was in tears as she stepped into the carriage; she felt if death snatched her child away, another of Athelstan's blessings would grow to be a sorrow, and if she could have followed the bent of her mind, she would have travelled day and night to have been with her child; but there was a debt of honour and gratitude owing to Lord Villeroy, which could only be paid by her remaining in London, and devoting her energies to prepare to merit the *éclat* that was attached to her name, and in fulfilling faithfully her engagement with him at the Minerva.

CHAPTER X.

A WARNING.

'There is some soul of goodness in things evil,
Would men observingly distil it out.'

SHAKESPEARE.

DAILY letters came from Italy; suddenly they ceased to arrive, and Vera wondered, hoped, and despaired in turn. Romany was her one solace; and she cantered him over suburban roads until she met the quietude of semi-country lanes and broad commons; and she enjoyed ambling under the shade of trees that were still bright in spring tints.

These rides formed relaxation to rehearsals, that Lord Villeroy entreated Vera to attend frequently, as an influence to benefit his 'company.'

A few days before her *débût*, the grand tragic star came to rehearse with eyes swollen by weeping, and with troubled and anxious heart; yet her words tripped easily on her tongue.

'If we could get good news from Italy all will go well,' said Lord Villeroy to Malton.

'So far I have managed well,' was Malton's reply, 'and I will get good news in time to settle all as we wish.' And thus this delicate matter was left to Malton's management.

At length the day to open the Minerva came with all its evil and good. The morning was fine and bright, Vera was early in her riding-habit, and impatient to mount Romany, and chase away all thought in the excitement of an early ride.

She would brave herself to meet the thousand who were eager to welcome her with as much *sang froid* as though the mass contained but one head, one heart, one opinion, and that opinion good, honest, and favourable of her. A note was given to Vera by Mrs Burt, who explained that a lady was waiting for an answer and had refused to enter the house.

Vera read the letter, and observing that no names were mentioned, she used caution, and dismissed Mrs Burt. The letter ran as follows:

'My dear Child,—If you will keep my visit secret, admit me. If you cannot maintain secrecy, let me know you are not at home to receive me.

'From your deeply devoted mother-in-law.'

Vera opened the entrance door—Mrs Morgane was over the threshold instantly, and

clasped Vera in her arms and kissed her affectionately; this act being part of her plan.

'I must see you quite alone, Vera.'

'Come to my study, no intruders are allowed there.'

'My child, I could keep from you no longer. What is all the world talking about?' said Mrs Morgane when the study door was shut.

'They say all London, not all the world, is talking of me as the queen of the season; but the poor queen has an uneasy heart as well as an uneasy head.'

There was a proud, haughty look in Mrs Morgane's face. Vera saw its expression had grown hard, the lines of the handsome, regular features more severe and marked, yet a soft feeling made a quiver play on her small, finely-shaped mouth when she said,—

'Vera, I have lived to know the world is very wicked. Yes, evil lies are invented and the innocent suffer. My child, you are too young to be alone.'

'My mother is with me.'

'Always, Vera?'

'Always.'

'Then I am misinformed.'

'On what subject?'

'Never mind. You will never be judged harshly by me. Do you write often to my son, your husband?'

'Daily. He is always in my thoughts; I work for him, and when my fortune is made it will be his, and Malavita shall no longer be his place of banishment. Can a wife do more?'

'My child, no.'

Mrs Morgane found she had no need to utter the words with which she had primed herself, and she asked instead another test question.

'How do you intend to get rid of to-day?'

'For Athie's sake I wish to keep myself calm so to husband my strength to meet this evening's trial. I ride this morning, dine alone at two o'clock, after then, to be amused by Mrs Burt's wild talk, and divert my mind by trivialities from heavy matters, I shall help her to put the candied melons that are now dried mummies into jars. Truly a strange way for the season's queen to pass her time! Do you never go to theatres?'

'I could not be seen at a theatre, my child, but I will go to your private room; indeed, to ask your permission that I may be admitted to it, is one object of my visit to you.'

'Are you so fond of rouge pots and costumes? You will find my room dull, for I have excluded all friends, even my mother, for she would unnerve me.'

'Do you exclude me, or admit me?' Mrs Morgane looked steadily in Vera's face. 'I shall not unnerve you. Once I could be un-

nerved, ay, once, before my love turned to hate; but—no, I will not speak of that bitter time. Admit me to your room. I ask the favour for Athelstan's sake.'

'Has he suggested that you should make this request?'

'No; the wish is solely mine. Mr Morgane has done his worst to Athelstan, and he cannot give assent or refusal to any question I choose to raise.' Mrs Morgane's eyes almost flashed a double light as the fierce spirit of anger intensified the brilliancy that glanced defiance against the husband who had called forth her hate, as she continued, 'Mr Morgane has broken faith. I will avenge it. Yes, I will see you and your children.'

Vera put her hand with a sudden clasp on Mrs Morgane's arm.

'Let us cease talking. To-morrow I may talk of my husband and children, but to-day I must be all smiles and hypocrisy, and baffle any attempt to think on subjects that might end in giving me swollen eyelids.'

'But to-day you surely will let me be in your own room in the theatre! Vera, I will drive you to and from the Minerva—you will accede to this, and I will not speak a word on family matters.'

'Oh! willingly, and indeed I appreciate the honour you do me in giving me your support.

I need support. The public is fickle; I may meet hisses or a silent coldness; even then my consolation will be this: that in sad spirit I have sacrificed loved duties to labour to be worthy my hire, and act up to the height of my ability. I once loved acting—that taste may return.'

'It will, Vera; your success must stimulate it; but, my child, you must not speak of hisses; your greatest enemy would not be bold enough to make his voice heard except in applause. This is your day, Vera, work well in it, for its night will surely come. I detain you; you are already equipped for riding.'

'I depended on Romany to raise my spirits, but the proof of your interest and affection have made me quite happy.'

'Who is Romany?'

'My dear Arab; Ralph's gift to me.'

'Bought of a band of gipsies, or why named Romany?'

'Mrs Morgane!'

'Ah, Vera, there is no law that can bind a gipsy; he may steal an Arab and sell him for a five-pound note. Yet what can I know of the ways of gipsies!'

Mrs Morgane checked herself, and ceased speaking abruptly.

'Romany is well guarded.

'He may be, my child, but remember, too, there is no law that binds an evil tongue. Take

care to keep your name fair, your reputation pure: be sinned against, but sin not. At present I believe in your sincerity.'

Vera raised her arm energetically, and, pointing her finger upwards, said, in an excited tone, 'Whilst I fear God I will not fear man;' then, putting her head gently on Mrs Morgane's shoulder, continued, 'Why do you speak so to me? Your words come to me like a warning.'

'They are, my child. To-morrow I will speak plainer — to-morrow, after your *débût*. But it is nothing—mere idle gossip. Enjoy your ride; I will return in good time to drive you to the Minerva.'

Mrs Morgane left, having made her first essay in playing the spy over her daughter-in-law.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DÉBÛT.

'We each of us have to put up with his own destiny.'
VIRGIL.

'WHAT a bijou! Ralph is too good to me; yet I am glad all is so beautiful, as you are my companion,' said Vera to Mrs Morgane as they entered Vera's luxuriant and tasty room at the Minerva. The *tout ensemble* was a surprise; it gave little pleasure to Vera, but she made an attempt to appear interested as she gazed from one pretty ornament to another that Ralph had lavishly placed about to gratify his whim of pleasing her.

Lord Villeroy was at this moment Mrs Morgane's *bête noir*.

Mrs Morgane glanced round the room, saw herself reflected in many mirrors placed in position to give re-reflection, and said,—

'Ralph has made a blaze of light and glare with gas and glass. That dress is pretty.'

'It should be; every thread has been studied by my friends. Oh! I am surfeited with tinsel. Now, dear Mrs Morgane, sit out of the glare whilst I go to my dressing-room and become transformed into Juliet.'

Mrs Morgane threw off her cloak that had concealed her dress from head to foot, and, to Vera's surprise, she stood before her wearing a costume of a gentlewoman of Verona in Juliet's time.

'Are you going on the stage?' was Vera's question, quickly asked.

'Perhaps I may,' replied Mrs Morgane, with a cunning expression. 'The reason that I desire to make myself one of the *dramatis personæ* is that I may be seen at the wings without being observed; my walking dress would have claimed attention, as I shall be your shadow to comfort you.' Still a cunning expression was the index to a cunning plan.

Vera was again surprised, and she answered mechanically, 'How kind and considerate;' whilst she was wondering how the pious Mrs Morgane knew that a stage had wings.

Vera had another shadow, Mrs Burt, who assisted Madame Libran when Vera submitted herself to the ordeal of being rouged, powdered, and frizzed by the little French dresser.

As Vera patiently sat through her transformation into Juliet, her thoughts would persistently recall subjects that distracted her mind from the part she had to perform. Her tears were swallowed, but a shudder passed through her.

'Madam, you are chilly, a draught you feel?' said Madame Libran.

Vera shook her head, to have spoken at that moment would have brought the whole edifice that she had built up so bravely to ruin. The thought that her child might be dying at that moment, far from her love and care, chilled her, and instead of tears welling to her eyes, her eyes took a look of wild horror.

'My child,' said Mrs Morgane.

Vera folded her arms tightly across her chest, as if to support herself, clinched her teeth firmly together, and closed her eyes to shut out the scene before her. She would think only of Juliet, of her part, that for the moment seemed as oblivious to her as words never heard.

Then Vera's nerves began to play their part. Would her memory prove treacherous; could she face her audience and not be overpowered by her personal griefs? Would it be possible that she could grow into Juliet? A thousand fears stole over her; they called every pulse into play, and made her tremble so violently that she doubted whether the chair was not frolicing under her by some new arrangement

of springs — horse-hair and gutta-percha. So she sat out her penance.

The entrance of Mr Malton with a telegram aroused Vera.

'What news! Is it from Italy?' she exclaimed.

'Excellent. Your child is almost convalescent.'

'Thank Heaven! What good news! Let me read it myself.'

'Certainly. It is my telegram, in answer to one I sent to Lady Scott.' The sly man had written it himself but a minute before, but Vera read it in good faith.

Her excitement exceeded all bounds as she said,—

'Oh! Mr Malton, I know now the joy that has made many a monarch knight the messenger who has brought good news! I have but hearty thanks to give you, and though I feel my voice tremble whilst I utter them, I am brave enough to act before all the crown heads in Europe, and rave out any amount of love nonsense to bewitch my Romeo. Oh! Mr Malton, if I had carried all my anxious care with me on the stage! Thank God, the worst is over. I could cry with joy. I could, indeed.'

'Keep up your courage. In half-an-hour's time we shall all be in Italy,' said Malton.

'The ruse is a success, and courage high, Villeroy; you have only to give the true tele-

gram to-morrow, and all will be right. All my mistake; make me the scapegoat; anything to help you,' said Malton outside Vera's door to Lord Villeroy, who waited his return.

'Now, madam, it is time to put the finishing touch to your toilette. The good news has given to you the charm of animation. Once I had a sad—'

'My dear Madame Libran, not a word about a sad tale. I have to break my heart and die before I return home. My agitation will bewilder me again! How I long to see the footlights and have it over. Shall I forget my words, or hash them with Desdemona's or Cordelia's? Perhaps I may blirt out a sentence as Lady Macbeth, for my head is in a wild whirl. I could talk my own thoughts for an hour, but the prompter may find me dense and blank when I tax my memory to repeat my part and find all a void. Well, I have made Mr Malton happy, and given him the impression that I am in full glee. Ah, me! It is a hard war when one wars against oneself! Finish me quickly, that I may sit down and collect my thoughts.'

Madame Libran and Mrs Burt were dexterous in performing their duties, and Mrs Morgane looked on as Vera grew more beautiful in her faultless garments. Then she saw for the first time the witching creature Vera became in her

stage attire, and she made Vera look at her repeated reflections in several glasses that mirrored her; telling her that her profile was perfect, her figure grand, that she was a lovely, majestic Juliet, yet soft and womanly. Madame Libran took much of this praise to herself, for Vera was her handiwork, and she was jubilant in her demonstrations.

Vera was not elated, as she permitted her assistants to carefully seat her on a couch, so that no unnecessary crease should mar the satin or ruffle the lace she wore. Her exterior showed a lovely Juliet; but she was still Vera, with her longing wish to be once more in Winander Cottage, with her home treasures around her—a wish that hustled Shakespeare's poetry into 'sleeveless words,' as she made in thought a poem of sad facts that formed the motive of her present actions.

The thread of Vera's reverie was broken by a messenger asking if it were possible to see Madame Verge-Morgane.

Vera answered the query, saying,—'It is possible.'

A man entered, and in a foreign accent said, —'Madame, will you accept this packet and the donor's wishes for your success?'

'With hearty thanks. To whom am I indebted for this kind act?' said Vera, taking the packet.

'This note will explain.' The messenger left hastily without further parley.

'An anonymous writer begs my acceptance of diamond ornaments, and requests one may be placed on my head, and the other worn as a brooch in the centre of my bodice,' said Vera, after she had read the note.

She opened the case. The jewels sparkled under the strong gaslight, and called forth the exclamation, 'How brilliant and handsome! This is very mysterious; no name or word enclosed in the case that can give any clue to the giver.'

'What is that intended for at the end of the letter? What is that?' said Mrs Morgane tartly.

'That. Oh, I took that for a flourish badly penned; but I see it is intended to represent my two little marmosets, and they, too, were sent me anonymously years ago. My hands tremble so much, do, dear Mrs. Morgane, take the ornaments out of the case. I will wear them as requested.'

'Mrs Burt will assist you. I disapprove of anonymous gifts, and you do wrong to accept that gift.'

'How can I return it? And see, it represents money value — beggars must not be choosers. This is a harbinger of good fortune, and at this moment is acceptable as an

encouragement to win further regard. This silent present conveys good wishes and interest in me. Come, Mrs Burt, place these ornaments as I direct you. Here, on my head, and on my bodice below these flowers; they, too, were a present.'

'Anonymous gifts?' asked Mrs. Morgane.

'Oh, no! One of Ralph's many gifts to me.'

'These are lovely gems, Madame, and your agitation shakes them into a sparkling brightness,' said Mrs Burt, as she looked with admiration on the jewels.

'Good for the precious stones. Alas, poor me!' Vera would not risk a feeble attempt to laugh lest she should sob. 'Now, let me rest and think; think I am Juliet.'

Vera swallowed her tears, turning her bracelets round and round, and wondering how soon she would break down in her part after she had dashed once into it. She closed her eyes, and her teeth chattered together from sheer nervousness, as she grew cold under the fear of failure, and hot in the hope of success.

Mrs Morgane and Mrs Burt watched her in silence many minutes. As Mrs Morgane met the firm gaze of Mrs Burt, as she looked steadfastly to learn what effect Vera's condition had upon her, their eyes met. Mrs Burt said one word—'Arroma!'—in a tone of exclamation, though her voice was low. All thought for

Vera left Mrs Morgane, in a moment she was absorbed in herself; that one word staggered her.

Vera opened her eyes, the dazed expression in the face of Mrs Morgane led her to imagine it was her own state that had alarmed her.

'Who is talking of aroma? I dislike scents. I am restless. Let me pace the room until I can pace the stage.'

'No, no; not so, Madame. I must hold the dress, and the fan that you want to squeeze to give you confidence. The fan must be attached to the waist, or you will surely mislay it.'

So Madame Libran paced the room with Vera as her train-bearer.

'Arroma,' said Mrs Burt again; then she continued to talk in a strange language. The effect of her words increased Mrs Morgane's discomfort; who also said a few words in the same language, and Mrs Burt replied, 'Tueta.'

As Vera paced the room to control her nerves and subdue her fears, she observed this strange parlance, and the excitement of Mrs Morgane and Mrs Burt, who continued their conversation in a rapid manner, and they kissed each other when they had ceased talking. After this act, Mrs Morgane was fuming in suppressed irritation, but Mrs Burt returned to her duties, and arranged the costumes that Juliet needed as the play advanced, with a look of triumph ill concealed.

Vera was not proud of her appearance, but knew to look pleased and beautiful would win more hearts than if she came before her audience with a sad or tear-stained face. For five minutes she paced her room, that excitement might not cause tears to blur and disfigure her eyes. In that five minutes what a volume of the past had been opened suddenly before Mrs Morgane.

The play had commenced.

'I will rest now until I am summoned; give me my part, Madame Libran,' said Vera.

Vera, appearing to interest herself in her part, turning from page to page, relieved Mrs Morgane from her fears that some remark might have followed the demonstration of friendship just gone through between herself and Mrs Burt. Vera was too bewildered with her own agitation to give thought to the acts of others, wherein all was mystery too deep for her to fathom. Yet not one act was unobserved by her.

The summons came. A few minutes later Mr Malton led Vera away. She passed Prince Terence unnoticed; she saw the anxious look on Lord Villeroy's face as he gave her words of encouragement; she made no answer to Mrs Morgane's words,—'My child, be brave as you excel;' she was mute to all who surrounded her. When on the stage she was in supreme agony, feeling intense horror, as a terrified child might if placed in the centre of a ring of Indians

during their war dance. She was dizzy; the applause sounded to her as a muffled storm afar off—a continuous roll of distant thunder that would never end. The stage carpet danced in patterns that chased each other about, sometimes many yards below her feet, then rising to her very eyes. Were there a thousand spectators, or but one to form the audience? she knew not; for all swam before her in a mixed whole of bright light and confusion of colour.

Vera's strong will and determination made her stand firmly on her feet, mechanically she bowed her head to acknowledge the honours showered on her, with grace it might be, for she did not reel, but if with grace, the grace came to her by accident.

In her inane, lost condition, in the midst of enthusiasm and exclamations, 'she moves a goddess and she looks a queen,' worthy her power over all hearts, but her words were inaudible.

The hush came. Vera was wholly in herself; with great effort she kept back the welling tears that nearly brimmed over her eyelids; the remembrance that many jealous eyes looked upon her nerved her to force courage to her words, and play her part to success if possible, *coûte que coûte.*

So this victim to hard trials fretted her way feverishly and painfully, forming a centre to

meet the gaze of thousands of eyes through lorgnettes carefully adjusted to proper focus. Under this scrutiny every feature, every plait of her dress, every diamond in her hair, were unmercifully tested, but further the test was powerless; not a tithe of her suffering was known, and the remark was current—'slightly nervous; the next scene she will be in better tone.'

The words were true. Vera grew into Juliet. In breaking her sham heart she touched those who had little heart in their daily walk in life; in her love passages she gained hearts that were difficult to melt into soft sympathy; and when she counterfeited death, the power of her acting created a silent embarrassment, a hush that made her feel she had given the thrilling effect to the incident that might mean success. The past and future were forgotten by her in the stern ordeal of to-day—the ardent wish at this moment was wholly concentrated in the hope that she had acted her *rôle* so to merit and win rank among the foremost in her art.

As the curtain fell, the tumult of excited feelings arose; to a man the voice of applause rang out. When it touched the floor of the stage, Vera was raised to her feet, congratulations were whispered in her ear by her many friends who surrounded her, and Mrs Morgane, who had mixed among the Capulets and Montagues, stood in the group.

The pious Mrs Morgane, who had lived in awe of theatres—so low, so wicked, so entirely degrading to performers and audiences, that a law should be made to suppress them, who had agreed with her husband in his opinion that they were evil places and snares for the weak, yet now in stage costume she paced the boards of this inferno, whereon she acted a part to suit her own plans for good and evil. Vera did not understand this vigilance and kindness displayed by Mrs Morgane, nor could she appreciate either on its true merits, nor reconcile such acts to reason, for had not her profession and the actress been despised? Palgrave has written, the art of exalting lowliness and giving greatness to little things is one of the noblest functions of genius; so Vera gave to Mrs Morgane's attentions all the weight of a mother's goodness, single-mindedness, self-sacrificing, affectionate devotion to a son, by thus honouring his wife.

The time came for Vera to answer the call of the audience. As Juliet, her grave-clothes were straightened into proper folds; but again she acted for herself, and a nervous, troubled sensation came over her. Had she been a girl just initiated into public life from a school or convent, she could not have been influenced by more painful feelings, but she had power to bring her scattered thoughts together, and reaped now the advantages of her stage training of bygone

years that made her proficient in the technical requirements that her profession demanded, but had not made her one whit less a woman.

Roy was called—the name under which the young earl acted—who deserved the honour, and who had far outstripped the expectations of his most sanguine friends. Then Vera could again face the audience, the applause would be divided, and she turned to Lord Villeroy, saying,—

'Come, cousin; I will lead you on the stage to receive an ovation well merited.'

So, hand in hand, the cousins passed before the curtain to acknowledge with bright smiles the applause, cheers, and bouquets freely bestowed. Vera glanced at her mother, and in the stalls she recognised Ossinman seated by the messenger who had given the diamonds and anonymous letter to her, and the mad Turk was among the audience, his fez-covered head and handsome, solemn features, that bore an expression of deep interest, attracted the notice of Vera—the incident of the rencontre at Windermere flashed through her mind. Success had made her eyes clear, that some two hours before had been dimmed by a misty blindness in the fear of failing to achieve it.

Again and again Vera answered the repeated calls of the audience, and on each occasion she missed some of her admirers. With a mother's pride of her child's talents, Madame Verge had

already made her way to Vera's room, and awaited her return.

When Vera saw her mother, her manners and thoughts as an actress were lost in her natural feelings of a daughter. The bouquets she carried she carelessly threw aside on a table to be arranged another time as trophies of success, and she rushed into her mother's arms, sobbing in broken sentences.

'My child lives, our little Hephzibah. I cannot help my tears, but bear with me, do bear with me!' and Vera laid her throbbing head on her mother's shoulder.

'When did you hear this good news, my Vera?'

'This evening, or I could not have worn these grave-clothes, and remained quiet in that tomb and think of my child as dead or dying. Oh, mother!' Sob, sob, sob.

'Calm yourself. Tears drawn from joy will end in laughter. Now, Vera, think only of your success.'

'How I wish I could! How I wish I could forget our cottage at Windermere. I have tried to do my best; my very best. Does all this applause mean a lasting success, mother? Can I make their fortunes?'

'Yes, my child, and your own too. Now, rest awhile.'

'I can rest, mother, if you will tell Prince

Terence that I cannot join his supper, as my child is dangerously ill. I should make too sorry a guest, for I have not one smile at my command. Mother, I worked at high pressure to-night, and am exhausted. Now, darling mother, go. Ralph will escort you, and I may be lost in sleep when you return home.'

Madame Verge left Vera without having recognised Mrs Morgane.

Mrs Morgane had quickly enveloped herself in her hood and cloak, and the pathetic scene, that would have touched the hearts of an audience with sadness had it been performed to portray the trials of an actress, raised in her hard bitter thoughts against her husband, and gave her a still more longing thirst for revenge.

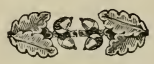
Mrs Morgane drove Vera home; saw her devote the little strength that remained with her to write news of her success to Athelstan. After a light supper, she left her to take the rest she needed, but which she scarcely dared hope to meet.

Mrs Morgane was satisfied. Vera finished her day in no harmless, gleeful merriment; no jovial supper where genial spirits would laugh night into morning, then steal a few morning hours to balance the account due to night. Mrs Morgane was satisfied that Athelstan was not forgotten.

Let the self-righteous whisper, the pious raise

their eyes, the saints feel scandalised that Vera, the amateur, now the actress, had once been in their midst; let all be the better to know how noble Vera had proved herself. The strain upon her to meet the applause given, rendered her no object for envy, less an object to be despised, but one demanding deep sympathy. How much good it would do these idle people to look behind the scenes into the life of the actress, and reflect which would suffer most by comparison.

As Mrs Morgane drove to Magna House from Kensington she thought no more of Vera, whom she considered faultless, though Lord Villeroy might ride beside her on the following morning, and the world whisper mischief; but she conned over the startling surprise she had had in Mrs Burt's words, and she felt she was still near the 'restless seas of wretchedness and woe,' and that she had not outlived the danger that threatened to disclose events that had been her life's desire and long-planned object to keep in the background, dark, unknown, and forgotten even by herself.



CHAPTER XII.

A BOND OF FRIENDSHIP.

'Father! thy days have pass'd in peace,
'Mid counted beads and countless prayers;
To bid the sins of others cease,
Thyself without a crime or care,
Save transient ills that all must bear,
Has been thy lot from youth to age.'—BYRON.

THE telegram that Vera read the day after her *débût* ran thus:—'8 A.M.—Tell Mrs Athelstan Morgane her child is ill, but hopes exist that she may recover. My child's life is ebbing fast away.'

Lady Scott had sent this telegram, for at the first intimation that the children were stricken down by fever, Gordon Scott had left Italy. He could not see any joke in catching fever, but a much greater joke in returning to 'The Laurium,' and passing happy days at the Priory. Chris grew pleased to see him, and Joseph Cade, in a cool fashion, welcomed him when he

chanced to meet him. His coldness of manner had little effect on the Reverend Gordon Scott; as Tillotson truly remarks, —'Impudence comes on with vice, and grows up with it. . . . When men have the heart to do a very bad thing they seldom want the face to bear it out.'

We will look in the room at Milan, where the draft for the telegram was written, and follow incidents connected with it, whilst Vera became familiar with her duties and the public familiar with her.

In two cots lay two children in a darkened room, one child sleeping a calm, deep sleep, the other, with hard breathing, appeared to be striving to sleep—that sleep that awakes not on earth, but in the unknown regions beyond this world's ken.

Lady Clara watched the hopeless case—helpless now to soothe the sufferer, whom the doctor pronounced beyond human skill to save. With trembling lips and faltering heart, and half repenting her past action—an action known only to herself, and buried deep in the silent chamber of her conscience, where time might destroy remembrance—she kissed the pale, wan face often, feeling every touch would be the last, for

> 'Soon may this fluttering spark of vital flame
> Forsake its languid, melancholy frame!
> Soon may these eyes their trembling lustre close,
> Welcome the dreamless night of long repose!'

This little rosebud, nipped with 'a frost, a killing frost,' grew cold as ice, and at eight P.M. knew the mystery that each living mortal *must die* to know.

Lady Clara, with trembling hand, drew the bangle over the cold hand. *Hephzibah Morgane* was the name engraved thereon. She hesitated, a few moments decided her next action, and she carried out her intended scheme. She placed the bangle on the sleeping child's arm, and removed that which the child was wearing, so warm in contrast to the cold bangle she had just held; but it would be soon cold, for she placed it on the arm of the lifeless child, and then sought Father Cleon to tell him that *her* child was dead.

Interments quickly follow deaths in Italy, and the little Hephzibah was laid in the cemetery before Gordon Scott heard that he was childless.

Lady Clara went frequently to the grave afterwards to see the tomb she had raised over it; then she chose a piece of sculpture to place on this tomb. The tomb was too plain when only composed of a grey pedestal, so a marble angel with outspread wings, with an infant in her arms, posed with intent to represent the idea of soaring to heaven, was added. The only inscription was the single name 'Hephzibah.'

Every journey Lady Scott made to the tomb caused her secret to grow heavier; at last she thought she could lighten it by taking Father Cleon into her confidence.

Father Cleon looked grave, was silent some time after he heard the act he had promised to keep secret with no discretionary clause. His mind was much perturbed.

'Why have you committed this sin?'

'To spare him,' said Lady Clara.

'Whom? To spare whom?' reiterated Father Cleon, with a mild firmness.

'Does it not occur to you? Have you forgotten five years ago? Do you not recall to mind I had a cousin whom I loved? To spare him I have acted as I tell you.'

'My child, I condemn your act. I would have you pray to the Holy Mother to intercede for you that grace may be given you to see your sin and error, to give you strength to battle against our ever-near evil tempter, who has placed in your pathway a stumbling-block in actuating you with an unholy love. "So dear to Heaven is saintly chastity," my child, so dear, that the arch-fiend would whisper in your ear it were no sin to keep in your heart a semblance of love, that should die out if saintly chastity had been attained. Chastity admits of no stain in thought, nor dream of evil; it is the temple of a pure mind, of honour, and rectitude.

My child, fall not from this high standard. Let your husband alone hold his place in your heart and love. Think you that you commit no sin in deceiving your husband in this matter?'

'Father Cleon, must I speak more plainly than my actions have shown you, that I despise my husband? I may be faulty, but is he blameless? He will grieve for his child, oh! not so much as he would the death of a promising colt that he had destined to make a mark in the future. My husband is a society man; he shines there. He is a sportsman, thought much of in the field; he is a fairly good specimen of a convivial squire, hospitable, affable, full of spirit, and will enter into the wishes of his friends with a cordiality that gains their praises; and, to his praise be it spoken, he is ever ready to help a poor, struggling man, woman, or child. He is all this, and he is a clergyman and a hypocrite. If he were not a hypocrite I should not despise him. Ay, Father Cleon, for him to catch Lady Clara napping he must have a higher step when he walks over the paths of deception to cunningly cozen her; and the seeds of deception produce the fruit of hatred.'

'My misguided child, are you not playing the part of a deceiver? Discipline your heart to the principles of honesty. See you not that the act you have just done in secret and kept

in secrecy touches more than one individual, and is an act of dishonesty to many? Repair your error, my child; it is yet time.'

'I cannot, Father Cleon—I dare not. It is not possible to reverse all, and avoid a scandal; and should I not lacerate his fond heart doubly by disclosure? His child lives—lives for him to love, for me to cherish; and in cherishing her a bond of friendship is strengthened between my cousin and me. His child is the tie that must not be severed. But, Father Cleon, I will repair my error thus far: If any injury accrues to anyone from this act of deception, I will disclose all my misdoings; and further than this, you are closely connected with me, and held in the bond of friendship by all my family. I ask you to disclose this secret that I have entrusted to your keeping when you see any evil proceeding from it, if I should be taken from this world before you are summoned.'

'My failing daughter, you thus give power to repair your fault during our existences; what reparation can be made after our deaths?'

Lady Clara became grave.

'I cannot foresee any reasonable grounds to cause fear that this act of mine should generate evil. I reflected long before I decided to act as I have. For good or for evil I must abide by my decision. I will take into consideration by what means I can leave the secret in safe

keeping after our deaths, so that any injury to the innocent may be avoided. Clearly see this, Father Cleon, in a proper light. Athelstan, Gordon and I represent the only lineal descendants of Mr Morgane. In the next generation two representatives exist, whom I will call Athelstan's children, and further than this, all the property I possess, and may hereafter possess, shall be theirs. Will this repair my error? My dear, much-loved father, I have displeased you. I cannot recall my secret from your knowledge; let it not pain you to hold it It is far more harmless than your sense of justice might lead you to estimate it.'

Lady Clara knelt before Father Cleon, took his listless hand reverently, and kissed it. 'Forgive my error, my friend, my revered guardian. Forgive me, and let your blessing follow your forgiveness.'

A long pause and silence was the result of this appeal, and Lady Clara, in her heavy sable garments, stricken with grief and mental depression, looked as a beautiful figure of sorrow kneeling in abject humiliation.

Father Cleon complied with Lady Clara's request after a weighty conflict with his own mind, and a severe reproof to the fair sinner at his feet. From that hour forward Lady Clara grew less sensitive to flaws in rectitude, and worked her machinations with a bolder heart.

Thus a secret grew between two that might be revealed at a proper season, or forever remain undivulged. As yet but half the secret was told, but as time wore on, the suppressed half was given into the possession of Father Cleon, but under the seal of confession; and with the instinct of a noble, pure heart, he recoiled from the tale told him in horror. He imposed heavy penances on the sinner, that she might work out her salvation whilst life was with her, and make atonement for a crime past reclaiming, and become the one sinner who repents, and who causes more joy in heaven than the steady goodness of the ninety and nine just persons.

Good Father Cleon, high principled and not suspecting evil, could not conjecture that Lady Clara, as she was atoning one sin, and washing out the stain daily by penances and works, was at the same time dyeing her hands to diabolical blackness, and dooming her soul to unutterable torture by committing another. But in truth so she acted and played her part.

CHAPTER XIII.

LEFT ALONE.

'Woman's Honour
Is nice as ermine, will not bear a soil.'—DRYDEN.

VERA continued to meet with increasing success, and made large sums of money, and lost all embarrassment under her great responsibilities; but many a severe ordeal was passed before this consummation was attained. Sleepless nights, aching limbs, weariness, hoarseness, hysterical sobbings, a rebellious feeling at times against her vocation, that required all her courage and strength to subdue, to prevent her rushing off to Italy or Malavita.

Through all Vera's trials Lord Villeroy carefully watched her, and schooled her into taking care of herself, and noted the slightest appearance of overwork; for he ever remembered she had once overtaxed her strength. He was her patron, and as he possessed only a life interest

in his property, he was desirous that Vera should accumulate a good round sum before the bloom of her success faded, or another rival might eclipse her, and gain the good opinion of a change-loving and capricious world.

It was true to Nature that a sincere friendship should spring up between two beings following the same vocation, whose round of visiting was within the same circle, whose residences were but a quarter of a mile apart, and who daily met to chat, rehearse, or act together.

Lord Villeroy was a dangerous companion, though he had goodness of mind and principle that supported with honour all his attentions to Vera. He was brother, champion, friend, and lover combined in one case, and that case being as beautiful as Nature, fine breeding, and art polish could render it, gave him attributes that, if well used, lead to Virtue and Happiness; if abused, to Vice and Misery.

The fascination in Lord Villeroy's acting, and the soft tones of his words captivated many, for,

> 'The Devil hath not in all his quiver's choice,
> An arrow for the heart like a sweet voice;'

and often a sensation was caused to spring up among the fair ones entranced, who felt their woe too soon—they were slighted.

Could it be possible for Madame Verge-Morgane to be always with this titled, wealthy

Adonis, and not become the theme of conversation among the envious and disappointed? But the fine-spun threads that had increased year by year, drawing Vera's affections closer to Athelstan, formed her Religion of Love that no lover could tempt her to neglect, nor influence her to slight the object that demanded her worship; and she gave to him that faithful loyalty due to a husband whom accident had separated from her, but whose hope, joy, and love she deemed were bound and centred in her.

Too encompassed was Vera with innocence and true-conscious Honour, that banishes the possibility of a thought of evil, to mark the envious, or to see the often malicious side-glances that were cast at her; or the scorn shown her by the matrons, who flounced past her bedizened with diamonds, lace, and costly brocade, forming the staple of which they were proud—for such apparel denoted wealth and purse pride, and shallow brains too, when used as a mark of superiority. Vera did not notice these signs against her, and in her heart-felt gratitude to Lord Villeroy, she was often demonstrative in showing it in semi-public life.

Lord Villeroy did not misunderstand her, but the world did; he alone knew how to value these marks of esteem and appreciation. Vera knew society as it appeared to her, but she did not know the world and all its evils. In her

girlhood her mother had watched over her, and now

'She gazed upon a world she scarcely knew,
As seeking not to know it; silent, lone,
As grows a flower, thus quietly she grew,
And kept her heart serene within its zone.
There was awe in the homage which she drew:
Her spirit seem'd as seated on a throne
Apart from the surrounding world, and strong
In its own strength—most strange in one so young!'

Thus her life was a combination of art and simplicity. Her entrance into the fashionable world was instigated by Lord Villeroy, and it had gained for her the patronage that he desired, but now—

'In the Great World—which, being interpreted,
Meaneth the west-end of a city,
And about twice two thousand people bred
By no means to be very wise or witty,
But to sit up while others lie in bed,
And look down on the universe with pity—'

she was regarded as a white dove with a slight spot on her plumage; it was whispered to be somewhere, but no voice whispered where.

As the spot increased, Vera feared she had a speck in her sight, for often she felt embarrassed when her bows were unacknowledged, as she drove or walked, and met friends who proved strangers. No oculist could see so false a speck in her eye, but 'they who looked down on the universe with pity' still saw the white dove's

plumage getting decidedly more bespattered, and whence came the soil, no tongue could tell or finger point out.

Vera began to reflect on her position in society. For the first time thoughts flashed on her mind that never had place there before. 'Surely her profession was honourable;' it represented hard work, talent, and the power to entertain. This last power the 'twice two thousand' should appreciate, for they of all the world require being lifted out of the depths of *ennui*, and amusement provided to take them out of themselves and idleness. Would they appreciate the performance and not the performer? How unjust, but, alas! possibly a truth. Other thoughts puzzled her. Was the professional performer far lower in caste and grade than the amateur? When acting for love and charity was she admissible into the society that Lord Villeroy had taken her, and now was she not? Were the slights shown her but hints that she was dropped and treated with virtuous indignation? No satisfactory answer would form itself in her mind.

'The great world' began to shun Vera, and invitations for fashionable entertainments became less frequent. Even a whisper went round, 'Do you object to meet Madame Verge-Morgane? She is charming. Certainly, Lord Villeroy does keep that love of a horse for her.

Very harmless. People rave about her, and I think well of her; still there is just that.'

Just that! and never a word more explicit, but enough to imply a great evil, or a scarcely perceptible cast in her eye, or crook in her little finger, according to the severe or lenient mode of taking the phrase.

But where was the spring that set the foul mud in motion that ran its course and bespattered Vera? Miles away; it was fed and nourished by jealousy and envy, guided by hands so purely white that the pearls that decked them were not whiter. Under the cloak of wit and kindness, the material to add to the foul source and increase the flow of tittle-tattle was obtained; and Vera ranked this false one, this fatal foe, who scattered the cruel aconite, her chief and dearest friend.

Poor Vera! 'Soft as the memory of buried love! Pure as the prayer which childhood wafts above, was she;' yet calumny touched her, and she suffered in reputation unknowing the fact.

At this time, when surrounded by difficulties and petty troubles that were strong enough to add a rankling feeling of irritation and annoyance, Vera had to bear a rude shock to her domestic life—a painful blow that crushed it. Her mother, her life-long companion, mysteriously left her without a trace of her whereabout,

and without one word of farewell; and no one knew the moment of her departure.

Mrs Burt had been puzzled, as her vigilance on the door-step was again rewarded. She was still eager for letters, and when she had taken one from the postman, and the steam had opened the envelope for her, she saw the contents, a blank sheet of paper! 'The writer had made a blunder, and had posted the wrong portion of the letter, a very possible mistake,'—but a wrong thought, Mrs Burt. This single sheet of paper was a sign of which she knew nothing.

In the corner of that blank sheet were two marmosets scribbled as a sign, and the envelope was addressed to Madame Verge.

Madame Verge understood, and acted on the sign; and she wrote these words on the blank sheet: 'My darling, you *must not* make any inquires when you miss me. I shall be quite safe, and may return as suddenly as I leave you. Keep this paper, and this secret. To the world, say I am at the sea-side for the benefit of my health. Good-bye.'

Madame Verge addressed an envelope to Vera; enclosed the single-sheet letter, and dropped it in the letter-box when she left her house, never to return.

When Mrs Burt read this letter, it puzzled her as much as the paper did when it was blank, but she kept the secret. When Vera read the

letter, she kept the secret too, but in bitterness and sorrow.

Madame Verge's peculiar handwriting identified the note as much as though her name had been attached to it, and for some time Vera had *felt* rather than known there was a mystery hanging about her mother.

Now Vera was alone. Alone in the fullest sense of the word,—her very being seemed a lone, isolated existence. For whom near her did she live? Was she a money-making machine, without feeling, passion, or speech? She had all her home-treasure's interests at heart, and yet she was alone!—toiling, working alone! Vera recalled the refrain of the hymn that she had sung last Sunday when beside her mother in church, of the ninety-nine all housed and one on the hills alone. How she felt as that one now!

In her deep musings she asked herself, 'Were all these trials to season her life?' It was hard even for good, to taste this bitterness and say it is sweet, or drink this medicine and feel it is food.

Lord Villeroy was left to Vera, and for good or evil, to Lord Villeroy she clung in her desolate condition.

Her home now was no home to her. Must she find her home in the world? She decided there was a niche in it for her as an actress, as Athelstan had failed to find his proper niche in his family.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SNAKE IN THE GRASS.

'Hast thou been told that from the viewless bourne
The dark way never hath allowed return?
That all . . . with life is fled?
. . . . . .
Believe it not!'—ROBERT SOUTHEY.

MRS MORGANE took upon herself to be guardian to Vera—a sweet revenge on her husband, who was becoming daily more weakened in health. She reversed the sense of Milton's beautiful line, 'By steps we may ascend to God,' and became day by day more wicked whilst nursing her husband in his strange illness.

Mrs Morgane would not heed the keynote of her conscience when it whispered her, 'Let his memory stand for all vengeance, it is punishment enough,' but she played out her scheme not knowing how others schemed. To be omniscient could alone give her power to work out

the mischief she desired to achieve, to gratify her hatred.

She was stimulated by a cunning vigour of will that created in her a feeling that her special mission—nay, duty—lay in carrying through a wicked plan, that good might proceed from it. But all was low craftiness; a combination of bitter circumstances in her life had at last crushed all refinement out of her mind, and there existed in it a coarse revenge, relentless and determined, the hereditary taint in her blood, the reaping of the seed sown in her youth.

A glance in Magna House will tell a tale. Vera had become a constant visitor there, but had not seen Mr Morgane, who seldom left his own apartments in it. He had long ceased to have meetings or concerts, or to attend them elsewhere, and he gave little heed now about fattening his golden calf, but so broadcast were the chippings that came from his statue of the Dawn of Nations, that the calf was perforce gaining weight month by month, and year by year, without any personal assistance on his part. Mr Morgane was reaping the seed he had sown, and the harvest was unappreciated by him.

Contrary to Mr Morgane's recent habits, Mrs Morgane found him seated in her drawing-room, in his chair that had been removed from his own room at his request. She had passed the principal part of the day with Vera, who was

now her companion, and had consented to drink her five o'clock cup of tea at Magna House.

Mrs Morgane could indulge in the extreme sweetness of her revenge, for it was now in her power to bring Vera to Mr Morgane to vex him.

When Vera entered the drawing-room, she was startled at seeing Mr Morgane there apparently asleep.

'Come, Vera,' whispered Mrs Morgane, 'when Mr Morgane awakes from his nap, address him as father. Kiss him now—it may arouse him.'

'I dare not,' whispered Vera in answer.

Still in a low voice Mrs Morgane said, 'He wishes to see you. You foolish girl, you play your part ill. All is altered since you met Mr Morgane at "The Laurium.' I am changed. I have thrown off my cloak of hypocrisy. I appreciate actors at their true value, and the prejudice against them I treat as naught.'

Mutatis mutandis, the same spirit of honesty must be understood to actuate Mr Morgane as actuated his wife.

The suns rays that came through an open window were upon Vera, and played in bright lights on her golden hair. The fierce light threw into comparative darkness the more shaded part of the room.

'Sit here, my child,' said Mrs Morgane still in a whisper, and she placed Vera on a couch opposite Mr Morgane, saying, 'Look your best, never

mind the glare of the sunshine; your fox-tinted eyes—may I call them so?—look so well in it, and your pure white dress too. Now, I will leave you for a few minutes.'

Vera sat silent and motionless. Her memory fell back to old times, until her thoughts were with Athelstan; no thought had she of the sick man or her future. This house had been Athelstan's luxuriant home, and he was expelled from it because she was his wife. A sad pensiveness came over Vera's face, an exquisite pain wrung her feelings, a sensation of guilt created itself in her mind, and led her to believe she alone had ruined Athelstan. Her sad full gaze was fixed on the man before her, whose half closed eyes led her to believe he did not see her.

A question now arose in Vera's mind. Had Mrs Morgane a purpose in placing her there and leaving her alone with Mr Morgane? Possibly; and Vera felt the opportunity was not being used to forward Athelstan's interests, but in morbid regrets.

Mr Morgane sat motionless, but was fully cognisant of the fact that before him sat Vera, looking beautiful and sad; and he was trying to recall the past, and reconcile the present with that past; but he had vague flitting thoughts that made him feel there was some blank spot in his memory that should not be void.

Vera became thrilled with the desire to rouse

him; yet could she speak of her husband, and for his good, if she ventured to address him? She used caution, for Mrs Morgane had proved so difficult a riddle to solve that she dreaded she had been duped by a falsehood.

'I am glad to see you once more, Mr Morgane.' Vera could not say 'father,' it was a name so foreign to her mind when associated with a living creature, and she could not abuse the name by applying it to one who might resent the relationship.

The sick man opened his eyes wide. To his slightly distorted sight Vera, sitting in the sun's rays, appeared encircled by a halo. There was some glamour about Vera that influenced Mr Morgane so instinctively, that the lethargic symptoms of an inactive brain for the moment left him. Her voice was as a strong tonic to his nerves, but he made no reply.

Vera stood up with the intention of going nearer to the sick man, but he made a quick gesture with his hand that warned her not to approach him.

Vera was still under the glare of the sun, that lighted her white dress to a dazzling brightness. To a clear mind, with some lively imagination as poet or painter, Vera might have suggested the idea of being a phantom of beauty and pensiveness; to Mr Morgane she appeared like a messenger from some unknown land charged

with some weighty matter. 'You are Vera Verge the actress,' at length he said slowly and weakly.

The words chilled Vera's ardour. Had Mrs Morgane deceived her, or was she placed there to undergo a painful ordeal? were the questions quickly raised in her mind, and she hesitated when she said, 'I am known by that name.'

The sick man looked on her in a fixed stare, and said, 'You have answered well.' After a pause he continued in his usual sedate style of conversation, but in a low tone, 'The sun is allowed by a divine power to shine on the just and unjust, on good and evil. To me you appear clothed in his radiance; but are you fit to be numbered among the just?'

'I never sin willingly, but I forbear to judge myself, for we are all sinners.'

Vera stood spellbound under the steadfast look of the sick man's widely-opened eyes.

'Think you that I am just? You do not answer,' said Mr Morgane, with a feeling of irritation.

Vera reflected *toutes verités ne sont pas bonnes à dire*, but how was she to line Truth's cloak with lies to suit her questioner?

'According to your views, Mr Morgane, you may be just, but I cannot judge your actions. Be just and fear not.'

The same earnest look was in Mr Morgan's gaze.

'I may have relied too much on the strength of evidence that has formed the basis of my judgment; still—still—who are you? Vera Verge! Who is Vera Verge? I would be just!'

Vera was silent. ''Tis the mind that makes the body rich,' was the flash of thought that made her leave the question unanswered, for she had heard Mr Morgane's mind was touched, and rendering him poor indeed; and she felt, too, it would be a false move to declare herself Vera Morgane at this moment, when some confusion seemed to irritate her questioner.

Mr Morgane said slowly, 'You stand before me in the bright sunlight as one of God's most beautiful works, but the bright sun brings out adders as well as beauty! Vera Verge, your face must not delude me. Vera Verge! Would that I knew! I may die and never know! I will try and judge myself.'

Mr Morgane felt how bitterly weak his pride had rendered him. True, he had only broken faith with his wife, yet he felt degraded; and he had lost all influence over her. His illness had softened his feelings, but he had not the firmness of mind to show the mercy and moderation he deemed would be consistent with, and further atone the past. His reflections made

clear to him that circumstances had warred against him, though he had wished to be honest and upright. How could he act? He had no moral counterpoise, no mental clearness that could lead him to any conclusion to form his actions. The conclusion that ever followed his course of thoughts of all moods was sleep.

To-day he was awake to his surroundings, and his musings led him into a train of serious reflections. Though his plans were incoherent still, and mind wavering in his varied and misty conclusions, he manifested an acuteness that had been absent in him for many months. He spoke again, abruptly asking the question,—

'Vera, Vera, why have you come to see me?'

'I came here because—because—'

'Why?' asked Mr Morgane, attentively watching Vera.

Vera dreaded lest she was being judged by Mr Morgane, and she spoke the truth reluctantly.

'Mrs Morgane asked me to come here.'

'And you are still an actress?'

'I have to work to live, Mr Morgane, and God has given me a talent whereby I make money.'

'Have you no higher calling to-day than making money and acting?'

'The higher calling is the purpose for which my money is earned.'

'I have heard that you will act Lady Macbeth to-night, and that this morning you rehearsed a new piece. Who went to the rehearsal with you? What—silent? Did Mrs Morgane go with you? Remember I am judging myself.' Mr Morgane hissed his question just above a whisper.

Vera was so dazed, fearing she was being hunted down, that, right or wrong, in her dilemma she again decided to speak the truth.

'Yes, Mrs Morgane was my companion.'

In a hissing whisper Mr Morgane asked,—

'Will she be your companion to-night?'

'She may be.'

'Thank you for being candid. Let me think this matter out.' Mr Morgane closed his eyes as he leaned back in his chair.

Vera watched him, but could not penetrate the thoughts that were proclaiming to him that he now had justice on his side. If he had been deceived in one act, might he not in fifty?

Mr Morgane was long silent, and fell asleep.

A shudder passed visibly through his frame, and his features became rigid and drawn, and so pale a hue spread over them that Vera became alarmed, and feared he was dying.

Vera moved but one step, but the rustling of her dress disturbed Mr Morgane; but the horrors remained with him. His wild eye now

gave evidence that his mind was dazed as he fixed them again on Vera.

Whilst Mr Morgane had closed his eyelids to shut out the scene in which he was playing a part, he was again in a scene of his early life. A phantom had conjured itself into an appearance all visible to his mind; his eyes had again seen his victim stretched full length at his feet; every accessory of the incident that had embittered his life was clearly and painfully before him; and he felt again the grasp of his wife's hand upon his arm as he had felt it years ago; he saw the last look cast on him from his victim's eyes — a look that ever haunted him when between waking and sleeping, and in the dead of night glared at him vividly in his dreams. All that past fearful scene was clear again at this moment, even to dragging his victim's body across the threshold and flinging it in the street in the darkness of a December night, with the heavy flakes of snow falling fast around.

Mr Morgane looked at Vera as if he looked still on the spectre, his thoughts uncollected, his eye as wildly vacant as his mind.

'Can I give you any assistance?' said Vera.

The sound of a voice brought Mr Morgane to his present position.

'Assistance! Girl, you look alarmed. Assistance! What have you seen? What have I said? Why ask to give me assistance?'

'Nothing that I have seen or heard made me wish it, except that I considered you were ill.'

'Ill, verily ill!'

A long interval of silence followed.

Mr Morgane said, slowly and sadly,—'Vera, the greatest kindness you can do a murderer is to hang him—the greatest cruelty is to let him live. Life becomes a torture.'

'We will not talk on such a ghastly subject, please, Mr Morgane.'

'Ay, Lady Macbeth, we will. Ah! Lady Macbeth could not rub out the stains of blood,' then Mr Morgane added, slowly,—'Neither can I. No, they are still here—still here, and will be for ever,' and he looked long in the palms of his hands.

'You have been sleeping, and—'

'Sleeping! A guilty mind has no rest in sleep. No rest! No moment of rest!'

Mr Morgane kept his unblinking eyes steadfastly fixed on Vera, as he said, in a hollow, troubled tone,—'The dove that I have nourished in my breast has become the viper that has stung me to misery.'

'Surely Athelstan is not that viper?'

'No, no! There is a curse running its length through all my plans, but all now is signed and sealed—irrevocably signed and sealed! I am weak. Would I were dead! Would I had never lived! Oh, these wicked hands!' Mr

Morgane again looked strangely upon the palms of his hands.

As Mr Morgane might have just cause for sorrow, Vera was silent, lest a word from her should unconsciously probe a wound still tender. Sad as her position in the Morgane family made her, yet she had a ray of joy in knowing Athelstan was not the viper that caused misery to Mr Morgane. Vera judged Mr Morgane to be a man who had been guilty of some crime, and troubled with a painful remorse that caused him to form delusions tinged with truth. The next question he put to her made her form the conclusion that his mind was somewhat unsound.

'Has an apparition ever appeared to you?' asked Mr Morgane, still looking in the palms of his hands. 'Speak boldly. I shall believe you if you say you have seen one, for I have.'

'No, never.'

'Then you did not see all that was so clear to me. Strange. Will you go now, Vera Verge?' Mr Morgane looked full on Vera. 'Ay, the sun on your eye makes it the colour of the spectre's.' Mr Morgane paused, then said, abruptly, 'Vera Verge, Say? Did you sign your name Caston on your marriage certificate? It matters nothing, I am too weak now. Yet, I would be just. All turns on accident of birth. I am too weak, too weak to see to it. I will

sleep on it. Do not stain your hand by touching mine. Good-bye.'

Mrs Morgane entered the room at this moment, and said,—'Nonsense, child, you must not go, I have not had a moment with you.'

'You were with Vera Verge at the Minerva this morning.'

Mr Morgane spoke with a tremor of anger and irritation in his voice, yet Mrs Morgane had not heard his voice so clear in utterance for many months.

'Was I?'

'You will go again this evening,' said Mr Morgane,

'Shall I?' replied Mrs Morgane in the same careless tone of voice. 'Have you had your medicine to-day? Perhaps you do not remember.'

Mrs Morgane left the room without waiting for a reply. Mr Morgane seemed to have forgotten that he had wished Vera to leave, for he called her to go to him, and to put her ear close to his mouth he took her hand and drew her near, as he whispered—

'Nurse me, if I am very ill: promise to nurse me.'

'If I can find time,' replied Vera cautiously.

Mrs Morgane returned whilst Vera had the sick man's hand, and she was bending over him, and said in a coarse, harsh tone,—

'Up to your old tricks again, Lewis, flirting and kissing.'

'Oh, no, Mrs Morgane!' said Vera reprovingly; and she saw she had no medicine in her hand as she turned towards her.

Tea was brought in, Mrs Morgane seated herself at the table and made tea, and Vera carried a cup to Mr Morgane without a word of hindrance from Mrs Morgane. He refused it in a manner that showed Vera that he had a great repugnance to it, and she seated herself near the sick man with intent to drink the rejected beverage. Mr Morgane watched her, and Mrs Morgane watched her, and her countenance turned livid. She hastily went to Vera, who had raised the cup to her lips.

'Stop, Vera!' she said, with as much calmness in her voice as she could command. 'That tea is far too sweet for you.'

'I love sweet things; nothing can be too sweet for me.'

Still Vera put the cup in the saucer with the tea untasted.

'Oh! see, there is a fly in it—a little fly—there,' said Mrs Morgane. And Vera took the spoon in her hand, and Mrs Morgane took the cup out of the saucer, saying, 'You cannot drink tea that a fly has used as its swimming-bath. A fly to me is as obnoxious as a beetle. It does not matter! Indeed it matters much.

I could not witness anything so appalling as seeing you drink that fly's bath. You don't see the fly! Well, the tea shall not be wasted.' Mrs Morgane darted a quick glance at her husband as she passed him to pour the contents of the cup in the jardinière. 'My flowers will be the better for the tea douche. That fly would have been the cause of a fit of coughing that might have severely distressed you, Lewis.'

'Or caused something worse,' Mr Morgane replied.

His clear, round voice, with a meaning intonation, surprised Mrs Morgane, yet when she carried another cup of tea to Vera, her hand was steady, and she looked inquisitively into Mr Morgane's face. A cold, hard eye revealed a wicked intent, as the thought passed her mind, 'The dram must be stronger, and I must be at my post, or my scheme may fail. Brandy is slow in crippling the mind, but the mind must be strong, indeed, to possess vitality of thought under my drug.' A hideous smile played on Mrs Morgane's face as she formed her diabolical mode of revenge; but she acted on her plan, and carried it through unflinchingly.

Vera repeated her visit often to Magna House, but had grave suspicions that she could not reconcile to her conscience, and yet they were only suspicions, not founded on any substantial basis, and impossible to be expressed in words.

She would have befriended Mr Morgane, but, alas! he would only look on her in a vacant stare, as if she were something that came within his ken as he looked further to some indefinable object beyond her. He knew her, but he never addressed her by name again, or allowed her to touch his hand on arrival or departure; yet Mrs Morgane impressed on her that he desired to see her.

Vera felt she had her part to play, and she, too, called in the art of dissimulation, and allowed the patronage that Mrs Morgane lavished upon her, and loathed it.

CHAPTER XV.

SEEK OUR ENEMY.

'Oh, Heaven! that one might read the book of Fate,
And see the revolution of the times;
. . . . Now chances mock,
And changes fill the cup of alteration
With divers liquors!'—SHAKESPEARE.

'DEAREST ATHIE,—So busy preparing a new piece—"Job's Tears"—for next week, a sensational tragical piece of nonsense. The plot is unjustifiable, the best character is a victim instead of a victor, after many trials. I am sensitive, and enter into the passions I portray; in Shakespeare I always feel there is a noble aim, but this piece is without purpose—in a word, trashy. When I string up my powers to agony point, Heaven defend me from laughing! My audience will not have studied the plot so closely as I have, and may greet my efforts with loud sobs mixed with applause.

'Ralph tells me novelty is a necessity, and he anticipates a long run for the new piece, and much £ *s. d.*, so I do not mind how many tears I shed with Job, so that their flowing will bring a strong current of wealth to increase our capital as a reward. My friends write and complain that I am not true to my speciality, Shakespeare, that my *répertoire* is well suited to my genius. See, dear, a genius meets with sympathy sometimes; still, I lower my standard to please the non-lovers of Shakespeare, and make a burlesque of tragedy to please a sensational taste.

'I felt too acutely my character as Lady Macbeth when acting this evening. I thought of your father's hollow voice, his wild eye, his strange actions—all were clear to my mind. I was stunned and dazed by the demonstrative manner with which my mad scene was received. Oh, Athie! I felt so intensely, and even tried to glare my eyes as I had seen Mr Morgane's glare, and I felt so lifted out of myself.

'Your father has strange delusions now, and is in very ill health, but no name is given to his complaint; he is supposed to be suffering from general depression, but I fear he has more than a fit of the blues upon him. His doctor and I differ in opinion.

'I did not recover the effects of this day until I was in Count Zankal's well-filled rooms. The Count congratulated me so warmly, and made me

think so well of myself, that I quite forgot your sick father, whose sad condition had influenced me to act to the life my painful and trying part. I shall never act Lady Macbeth again without the events of this day being recalled to my mind.

'Prince Terence spoke so kindly of you, and was interested in hearing about your future prospects in Malavita. He and Sir John Donwell were at the Count's, and the best news given me during our supper was the intended visit of the Bishop of Malavita to England. I shall soon hear of you, my dearest, my best beloved.

'When will you return to England? I long to feel again your support during my anxious walk through life, which is now so lonely and desolate. I dream daily of the many happy days we are to pass, and recall the few happy years we have passed together.

'Dearest Athie, I have some spare capital, let me know if you could use it with advantage in your enterprise. I invest a sum every month in the name of our little Stannie: he will soon be rich. Riches make themselves wings secretly, so I provide against the possibility of my chrysalis of wealth developing into a moth of destruction.

'Now, I have to write a word of scolding. A fortnight has elapsed since you wrote me a line; that interval between your very short letters has often happened lately. Now, twenty-

five letters per year will not satisfy me, as I write you as many as there are days in the year, and scribble them off after as hard a day's work as you could accomplish at Malavita, and when I am as weary as it is possible for you to be—just as to-night I feel jaded and quite worn out; yet, tired as I am, I devote the last half-hour of my day to write my daily portion as the only cheering sip of happiness that I get in the whole twenty-four hours. Now, dearest, make an effort, and let me have a letter at least once a week, if it be only a hurried scrawl. My scold is now exhausted, and methinks I see now your dear face as I write good night. Oh! that I could clasp your hand and know we were not parted. Alas! I am alone, but still and ever your devoted wife, VERA.'

In course of time an answer was received by Vera as follows:—

'DEAREST VERA,—At last you have noticed the brevity of my letters. I have questions to ask you.

'Explain why you went to Fellby and Boss, leaving the cottage by stealth in the night, and causing alarm to your friends, even making it necessary to drag the lake for your supposed corpse.

'Explain why you were found cutting up melons for the pigs to eat under the porch, and

acting like a lunatic after an absence of many days.

'My next question is even more grave. Explain how you were met *accidentally* by a foreigner who paid your expenses at a hotel for several days? Perhaps the foreigner may be Prince Terence, a man who knows nothing of me, and, with sincerity, could not feel interested in my business projects.

'Beware, Vera, of deception. Matters are growing serious between us; and when you write to me daily, write honestly. For God's sake, never let me hear through another source the truth of your doings! You wrote me news about a railway accident. No mention has been made of it in any English newspaper, and I receive them as regularly as your letters.

'Vera, too many miles separate us to allow me to hear these reports calmly. I await your explanation before I ask you several other important questions.

'It greatly pains me to write this. I was broken down to the strength of a reed when I heard these painful reports of your imprudences. If you wish to derive support and comfort from me, act as befits your position as my wife.

'My old tutor, Bishop Donwell, is in my confidence; he has my permission to question you on several matters. Let this letter come as a

warning in time, so that I may now and always sign myself, your devoted husband,

'ATHELSTAN.'

Vera read her husband's letter, answered it, then sobbed herself to sleep. She wrote thus:—

'DEAREST ATHIE,—Your letter is an enigma to me. Who is our enemy? Pray quickly discover who is doing evil work! I answer your questions by referring you to my letters written months ago (doubtless you keep my letters, like I do yours), in them you will read the truth, plain and simple, of all my actions. The accident to the train, you mention with a tone of unbelief, was all too unimportant in character to be noticed in the leading newspapers. A delayed train is of every-day occurrence, and whether the Liverpool, or Dundee, or Exeter trains are late, or keep to time, is of no public interest. Now, should the sun or moon not appear at their stations when the sky is clear, that appalling inconsistency would attract grave interest, for they never have failed to come to time; but trains, dearest, are not worked to astronomical precision, so fail occasionally in their transit, and one halted when I was in it, and I was told, and believed, an accident caused the delay.

'Divest your mind of accident, of every exaggeration of simple facts, and know, dearest, when your confidant meets me he may sift my

words and read my inmost thoughts, and know that I live jealously guarding your honour and my reputation.

'Dearest Athie, rumours broke you down to a reed's strength; your letter roused a painful indignation in me. Painful, for your words carry suspicion, instead of the trusting love I fondly hoped would never be outlived by us.

'Too well I have lived to know the dangers and temptations that beset me. I have lived to understand the meaning of my uncle's remark, that I was too beautiful and too young to face them. My position is peculiar, my gifts—whether overrated or not, I will not decide—have placed me high in public estimation; but my head is steady. Dearest, having once tested the peaceful shelter and privacy of home, once filled the sacred duties of wife and mother, once been the happiest of mortals, I feel I am a being to be pitied, not envied. For the time to come back as once we passed it at Winander Cottage, I would willingly leave my high position, and bury myself again from public gaze, and find my life's pleasure in making your happiness. I work now for you. I have money enough for our necessary wants. I work to place you in a position you have lost, and to give you wealth.

'Again I write, seek our enemy, let no one come between us to mar the entire trust and love we have existing in good faith.

'Once more, my darling, good night. I have had a long, weary day, full of work and success, but miserable that I had not until now a moment to spare to write you how indignantly touched I have been by your letter. I stop writing to read it once more. I am reminded to answer your question about the foreigner and hotel bill. That tale is too far fetched and ridiculous, or too wicked and malicious, to have an iota of truth attached to it. Shakespeare knew the wickedness of the world when he made the Moor demand the handkerchief from Desdemona. Beware, Athie, of traps, and find out the foe who lays them, but pray do not fall into them. I have ever written, and ever intend to write, truthfully, and until you find a friend truer to you than I prove by all my actions and devotion, trust me implicitly, and let no rumour or suspicion weaken love or faith, but let me always feel that you are my devoted husband, as I shall ever be your deservedly trusted and devoted wife, VERA.

'*P.S.*—One word more. You must still feel interested in your old home, Magna House. I cannot understand many things that I have discovered there. I so long to write my mind freely to somebody whom I could trust. It is so difficult to have grave suspicions of wrong and yet be unable to check the wrong. I cannot

take Mrs Burt into my confidence, though she is as faithful to me as my dogs; and I do already talk too openly on subjects that are scarcely suitable to be discussed between mistress and maid. I begin to treat her as an old friend, and I find her cautious. To the point, Athie. I am so miserable about your father's condition, so very miserable, and—yes, I will write it once again—do come home; do, do come with Bishop Donwell. I have so much to tell you, and I am making money fast. Do not let your pride any longer make you hide away from your own people. Dearest, all I make shall be yours unquestioned. Never, never again write me a harsh letter. If I lose your sympathy, your love, Heaven knows only how I am to live my cheerless life through. These are not light words, for our love is a deep-rooted thing knitted within our souls, forming the weighty matter that unites our lives. It is no light bauble to throw away when once its deepest hold is felt to rule us, dear Athie, for happiness or woe. Remember, dearest, I have no loving mother ever near me now. I wholly live on your kind words, while my profession compels me to smile with a heart heavy and sad. Good night, dearest, and ever think well of me. I shall try and sleep, as I feel quite sure you will believe me rather than my enemies, and our misunderstanding is now at an end. Once more, good night.'

CHAPTER XVI.

A SECRET SOCIETY.

'Who among men has his desire, and having it is satisfied.'—THACKERAY.

SIX months after Vera had written to Athelstan denying all acts of levity, in a dark, damp, underground room, more properly described as a cellar, sat a refined-looking peasant woman; her dress was threadbare and ragged. This cellar was under the house of fair pretensions at Krashoff, not a mile from which flowed the Volga.

At the sound of a tinkling bell the woman felt for the matches she had placed near her, struck several before one, dryer than its unsuccessful companions, ignited, and lighted a candle that she took from her pocket, and stuck it firmly in a wide slit that ran through a rough wooden table. The light brought to view the face of Madame Verge playing the part of Madame Rimboff. She shivered in the chilly

air, and stooped to light a fire in a roughly-made brazier in which were laid wood and charcoal. The fire soon kindled into warmth, and Madame Rimboff commenced her work with a heavy sigh; yet it was a work she had desired to do as the trusted worker and helper of a husband who had been lost to her for years; and now to be re-united, perforce she must help to play his game. Madame Rimboff dexterously picked out four bricks that formed part of the flooring of the cellar, carefully put the bands of moss uninjured aside that had given the bricks the appearance of not having been disturbed for years. She scraped some earth away, and removed some papers that were closely written upon in cypher, and had been stored away, buried from sight for several weeks.

'Poor Demetrius, as weak as a mouse in the jaws of a lion. Poor Demetrius! and yet he feels so strong, and will not see the coming crunch. Ah, me!' Thus Madame Rimboff murmured, as she smoothed the surface of the mould she replaced, and put back the bricks in order, and cunningly placed the moss so neatly that close scrutiny would fail to discover that the moss had not clung to the bricks for years undisturbed.

Then Madame Rimboff made a fair copy of the cypher, warming her fingers at intervals

over the charcoal heat, and sighing and thinking aloud to keep a little sound stirring in the tomb-like gloom. 'All disguises bespeak evil work, all cypher writing danger abroad. Thank the gods, the packet has come from hand to hand; that danger over, another begins. Yet I feel as safe from discovery here as if I were perched on the summit of the highest peak of the Himalaya range.'

Madame Rimboff worked quickly and correctly, and finished the first copy of the sheets in the space of an hour. She rolled these papers in a coarse cloth, then kneaded some dough closely round the cloth in the form of a small Russian loaf, and placed this on the rim of the brasier to bake whilst she copied the papers a second time. During the baking of the loaf she stopped writing frequently, in order to turn it, so that every side should be firm, and the papers safe under a hard crust.

The second copy she placed between the quilting of a warm neckerchief, and also the papers she had removed from under the bricks were put in the same hiding place. This kerchief she pinned safely round her neck, and threw a coloured woollen shawl over her head that concealed it.

'Ah me! now to meet and face my difficulties! Poor Demetrius! How weak not to see his weakness!' Thus Madame Rimboff judged

her husband as she extinguished the candle, replaced it in her pocket, and in the same receptacle placed the hot loaf. The charcoal she scattered about the brick flooring, and watched the heat exhaust itself in the cold, damp air. Then she sat down again in the dark, gloomy cellar, waiting a signal.

The signal came, Madame Rimboff made her way amidst the embers that were still faintly glowing, and groped her way to an iron grating that yielded to her touch, for she knew the secret springs. After squeezing herself through the small aperture, she replaced the grating, and struck four bolts that kept it hard and fast, and showed no trace of its being an exit, but appeared to be massive ironwork securely built in stone and brick.

Madame Rimboff, still in the dark, groped her way on her hands and knees, careful only of her neckerchief and loaf. Presently she emerged into daylight and in the midst of a heap of logs of wood, seeming to be irregularly thrown together as if left to season for fuel, yet placed with studied care against the side of the house. Several logs displaced carefully by Madame Rimboff cleared her from all impediment, and after replacing the logs, she assumed a tired, ungainly gait, looked neither right nor left, and walked towards the public roadway to Krashoff.

On Madame Rimboff walked, carrying with her plots and counterplots, both the secret sides of a knotty question, clear only to those who knew the cypher. Possessing these papers made her heart beat wildly; to still it was impossible, though she knew her appearance gave no suspicion further than to lead to the supposition that poverty was her lot; and she knew a poor woman carrying a loaf in her pocket was not even in Russia an action to cause suspicion if discovered.

Following the order of her programme, Madame Rimboff entered a small restaurant and ordered a glass of spirits, and looked out for the sign among the men who were sitting and standing about that would cause her to give up the papers that she guarded, and she felt that a life dearer to her than her own hung on their safe delivery.

Madame Rimboff passed her hand twice over her mouth; her sign was answered, a man raised his hat twice in a careless manner, and as though his object was to relieve his head from its pressure. Madame Rimboff recognised Ossinman as the man whom she had once met at Winander Cottage. She trusted to her peasant's dress to prevent any identification on his part of herself. Ossinman followed her as she left the restaurant; for a short space of time they sat side by side on a rough form outside. Not a word was

spoken, a gendarme was standing before them, yet Madame Rimboff slipped the kerchief from under her shawl, and it was passed quickly into the man's pocket, and she left him.

Ossinman took the kerchief out of his pocket, put it round his neck, buttoned his fur-lined cloak over the ends, as he walked close to the policeman with his dangerous secrets.

Ossinman had recognised Madame Verge, yet that Madame Verge should be one of their society was a puzzle he could not put in order.

Madame Rimboff, *alias* Verge, walked towards the river, and turned to enter a house, but hesitated, as two gendarmes were laughing together at the entrance.

'Do you know anyone here?' was the question put to her in Russ.

Madame Rimboff's answer in the same language was scarcely audible as she said, 'No, I am a stranger.'

'Speak up, woman. Who is your friend who was here? You must have had some object in coming here.'

'Yes,' answered Madame Rimboff. 'I came to fetch some washing.'

'Well, the washing for this family is now done at the cost of the Government, so no need to call again.'

Madame Rimboff walked away without a shred of suspicion attached to her.

Something was wrong, and the shades of evening were beginning to darken the road, and Madame Rimboff used caution, and must seek some place of concealment for the night, as her house of refuge was now under the surveillance of police authorities. At the moment when she began to despair, a bright flash of thought came to aid her; she would seek her husband's best friend, Count Narodisky, but she would cut all clue, to prevent a trace of her refuge, for she had spoken to the police face to face, and evil might follow her. It became dusk, but not dusk enough to prevent identity; and still swayed by the hope to deliver the loaf to the right person, Madame Rimboff made her undemonstrative sign before the few men and women she met. At last the counter-sign was given, Madame Rimboff's face became livid; the moment had come to give up her burden, but the receiver of it was Nief, and she knew him to be her husband's enemy. Had she fallen in a trap? But her duty was clear. She must obey her orders without question or doubt on her side.

'You are late,' said Herr Nief, as he put the loaf under his cloak.

'Have you any news?' said Madame Rimboff, without taking notice of Nief's remark on her late arrival.

'A mere ruse, a few innocents entrapped at

Nord, a stone's-throw from here, but the wide-awake birds have escaped the snare. Get away. Quick! I hear a measured step that forebodes evil.'

Herr Nief hurried to the bank of the river, sprang into a boat, and rowed himself up the river, and was lost in the dusky shades of evening.

Madame Rimboff's next move was to seek Count Narodisky, when darkness would cover her with the secret mantle she needed.

The class of Russians represented by the clothes worn by Madame Rimboff often rested and even slept in the pathways, huddled knees to noses in their rags, and no suspicion nor remark was suggested by a proceeding so common.

Time flew his pace, but Madame Rimboff was impatient at his slowness; darkness came at last, whilst she was resting on a mound by a high wall. A gentle touch on her shoulder made her start, and now she was not alone; in the English language a man addressed her, saying,—

'Do not be alarmed, Madame Verge, I am a friend. After doing my duty, I lost no time in following you.'

'Who are you? Who is Madame Verge? Give your reasons for following me.'

'I will,' was the man's reply.

It was the ever faithful Ossinman who spoke to Madame Rimboff. He never joined the brilliant assemblies over which she presided; he knew her only by the name of Verge. He habitually denied himself all the enjoyment of society and familiar intercourse with the world. He lived to benefit his cause; his aspirations led him to believe that the abstruse questions of government reform were on the eve of solution. Laboriously had he worked with pen and brain to achieve the end he foresaw in the fall of despotism and the building up of a national, assembly and constitution into more substance than a dream. He was profoundly impressed with a great hope that gave to all that was highly speculative a touch of reality. But his habit of thought was untrue to human nature; he put that nature at far too high a grade; he was unfamiliar with life as ordinary mortals pass through it; the tenor of his writings and his opinions led him to take exceptional character and characteristics as strict rules of nature. He took man by nature to be unselfish, high-minded, generous, loving honour, order, purity, and freedom; tyrannical oppression and rigorous severity turned these natural attributes into opposite qualities that brought down man to a lower standard, degenerating him to a being contemptible to see, and painful for the victim to become.

Ossinman's intellect was of an uncommon order; he studied to elucidate many difficult metaphysical subjects, in order to train and school his own mind and energies, and thus enable him to go right as he walked along a difficult road, 'paved with ayes and noes.'

Such was Ossinman, shut out from the world, voluntarily secluding himself from friends and family, confining his requirements to the smallest limits, and letting his mind traverse the highest and furthest range that a strong, indomitable, unchained will, aided by a large intellectual capacity, could attain.

Ossinman knew human nature aright thus far, that a mother's love seldom or never failed; and he gave his reason for following Madame Verge after some reflection, for he feared he had offended her.

'My desire to deliver into your hands this packet of letters made me follow you, a liberty I trust I am forgiven, as I feel it is justifiable. I plead guilty thus far. Many months ago I saw advertisements in various papers to gain the address of Madame Verge. Having seen you in Zürich, I took upon myself the responsibility of answering them thus—that letters addressed to a certain house in Zürich should be forwarded to you; but when these letters arrived, I had lost all clue to your whereabouts. Pure accident gives me the oppor-

tunity to give you this packet if you wish to claim them.'

'I know the handwriting.' Madame Rimboff hesitated. 'Yet if I claim them, that is no proof that I am the Madame Verge to whom they are addressed. Madame Verge may have many friends.' Madame Rimboff eagerly took the letters.

'It behoves us all to use caution. Madame, can I carry out any commission for you, or help you in any way?'

'Thank you, no—unless—but I could not ask such a favour, and the night is cold—no, thanks, I require nothing.'

'I know you would ask me the loan of my cloak. Accept it; it will further delude spies, and the very air teems with them. Have you to go far?'

Ossinman put his cloak on Madame Verge as he spoke.

'It is not my wish to be ungracious, but where I may go to-night must only be known to myself. How can I return this cloak to you?'

'I gave you the cloak, and please accept it for the good of our common cause.'

'I have been face to face with the police, and need to alter my appearance. See, the cloak reaches to my feet and hides my rags; and I will wear my shawl turban fashion, so shall have

no look of the peasant left on me. For our cause I accept your cloak with many thanks; yet I fear the night is too severe for you to give it up without risk of taking cold.'

'I, too, would alter my appearance; and a cold is of minor consideration, and the importance of our cause cannot be over-estimated. Adieu.'

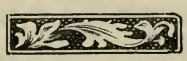
'Adieu. It is well that our domiciles should remain unknown, but we do not distrust each other by this cautious silence. Adieu.'

Ossinman followed Madame Verge at a distance and traced her to Count Narodisky's house, where she gained admittance for the sake of a common cause, but at the peril of severe punishment falling on her entertainer.

A room at the top of this house was appropriated to Madame Rimboff's use.

Madame Rimboff was alone now with her reflections and Vera's letters, and in this position regrets came to her that she had joined an acting force that was too weak to oppose insurmountable difficulties that cropped up in numberless forms by day and night. She did not believe in Demetrius' theory, that numerical superiority was of little value, and that moral force would overthrow the force he judged to be a *fallacious* power of oppression, and that was rotten to the core. These theories had not her credence, that as moral pressure gained good

ground and footing, the oppressor would be weak, alone, and the centre of a huge mass of discontented subjects, and that every patriot would join against a common foe, and thus that foe must fall. All such theories she held to be futile, and in this frame of mind, it was natural that Madame Rimboff's thoughts were more centred in her daughter than in the state of the cause her husband served with all his energy and might. Whilst Madame Rimboff (*alias* Verge) read Vera's letters, Ossinman retraced his steps, and found his night quarters in a small room bare of comforts. He shivered as he wrote and read, until it was beyond his power to steady himself to his work. And when in his bed, he lay cold, sleepless, and shivering. The absence of comforts and home attentions from loving relatives were unthought of; the cause for which he sacrificed all affections and ties was permanent in his mind; and he thought only of his unhappy people, and not of his own condition.



CHAPTER XVII.

CONSPIRATORS' CONFERENCE.

'Yes, from the records of my youthful state,
And from the lore of bards and sages old,
From whatso'er my wakened thoughts create,
. . . . . .
Have I collected language to unfold
Truth to my countrymen.'—SHELLEY.

AT a place of rendezvous where Rimboff met his colleagues by appointment, was Ossinman awaiting his arrival, laden with a sherd of news that had made him leave his own secret quarters to impart it to his chief.

Ossinman was a man who would sacrifice himself to duty, otherwise, he would have thought it an act of prudence to have sought the aid of a doctor in his present state of suffering, for his breath was laboured and his strength had suddenly become greatly weakened.

For the love he bore Rimboff, Ossinman had been subtile, and he felt there was no baseness

in deceiving his enemies, even though deception was covered with the cloak of friendship; for all stratagem was fair that contributed to his country's welfare, if only it coincided with his views of patriotism.

It was dusk before Rimboff returned to his retreat.

'You here, Ossinman! Too valuable a life to risk needlessly; and danger threatens all who enter here in my absence. You appear ill?'

Ossinman grasped Rimboff's hand.

'I have news. My life is of little value.'

'Little value! Surely you desire to see the *magnum opus* of your life accomplished! Your works are read, passed from hand to hand; your ideas quoted, yet the veil is transparent that dims the direct allusions to our cause. Ossinman, value your life. Each grain of sand carries weight, or how is it the sackful is so heavy? Come, my insignificant grain; let me have the weight of news you may carry with you.'

'I have news and fears!'

'Scorn fears—yet let me hear them.'

'I fear the dagger and bullet may supplant the pen and voice. More than moral pressure is urged, and dastardly crimes may follow.'

'The voice of the people must be heeded—it is swelling louder and louder. Time will tell its tale. Many revolutionary moves are justified by results, but wanton, reckless bru-

tality must be guarded against. A fair pressure to gain the front and be heard, mowing down every obstacle, but respecting life, is justifiable. However, Ossinman, your fears are in the future —leave them there. Let me hear your news.'

Many disclosures and incidents were related to Rimboff by Ossinman of their peculiar position with individuals and the Russian Government, and touching the revolutionary movement that aimed at the great reform. This reformation, truly a colossal venture, yet meeting with no sympathy from many who lived their lives in happy ignorance of stratagems, sacrifices, and anxieties, of the hard labour voluntarily accepted by the organisers and inventors of schemes to foster the strength of the pending struggle. There was another side to this question of reform, and from it emanated the detective police system, created to crush this venture, and this force was ever vigilant. Rimboff was now the chief conspirator and agitator of a particular section of a wide-ranging scheme of revolutionary action; Ossinman gave him many names of friends who were under the eye of the police, and the victims were unconscious of their surveillance.

'Some we can save without compromising ourselves,' said Rimboff quickly. 'No harm can touch Narodisky. I will jot down friends valu-

able to our cause, and who, for its good, must be warned.'

'Count Narodisky should be warned.'

'Your reason? His hands are cleaner than ours; he can make his case good.'

'Possibly. But at this moment he is concealing a lady.'

'A lady! What interest have you in her? A romance?'

'I met her once in England, and would warn Count Narodisky to serve Madame Verge.'

Rimboff showed no sign of surprise, but felt a twinge of romance himself. He was startled at this disclosure, but said carelessly,—

'Narodisky shall be warned. What more do you know of this woman?'

'I know she is one of us. I played the spy on her after I received my cypher packet.'

'My most modest author, when will you know your worth? Understand, good Ossinman, your pen-work is admitted into high places, and in holes and corners where no individual could talk treason, or what would be construed treason; but your words, garbled as a Jesuit's, do a duty. Keep to your noble work, and let spyism be the work of meaner minds. Throw all your energies into our cause, help it, make the million happy who now bewail their lot, strive to gain for our posterity the boon of freedom. You risk too much in a double work.'

'I may risk to bring to light a journal with

plain truths told in clear words. Would I could, and leave garbled words to be written by others.'

'Good Heavens, Ossinman! believe me, your power is in fiction, and such strong froth may be the best test of a sound working underneath. Write on, for the shadows are growing vivid that herald your next work; already the public hunger for new thought on our old grievance. You have hit a mark; play well to it, and you will score the good opinions of thousands, and work our hopes into facts.'

'Ever hopeful, Rimboff. Yet you stand on volcanic ground, never knowing when you will be food for the earth's maw. I stand on a similar footing, and thus fail in hope.'

'Strong reliance in the success of a gigantic enterprise is the soul of strength that gives it existence. You lose hope, *en revanche* we gain a more formidable pen; the struggles of a drowning man, the last wails of despair, are often the strongest; thus hard fights for very life brace our nerves and strengthen our energies. We waste valuable time. Look out. Is the night dark?'

Ossinman hastened to look out, but was checked by Rimboff saying,—

'Be guarded, man. Close my door first, for this house is a fortress of strength whilst its inmates are supposed to be honest, hard-working folk. Let suspicion once touch it, no pious fraud would save it from utter uselessness. A

speck of light at this hour visible outside might bring foes upon us.'

'The night is dark enough to hide one from all foes,' said Ossinman, when he had returned from his cautious peering into darkness.

'Then it shall soon hide me on my road. I am more in the world of action than you, Ossinman, yet doubt if I make so much noise in it as an individual. I scarcely know where to find my veritable self, for my names are legion, as well as my nationalities and costumes.'

Rimboff was putting on a sheepskin coat as he spoke, and he looked a vagabond in it.

'See,' said he, 'I am no longer Rimboff, and rogue as I appear, my boys see in me the germs of their good angel, and I grow imaginary wings, and become the creature of power they make me, to those who struggle against wrongs, and a strong impetus to move those who are sluggish and lack the spirit to join our righteous cause. We must stir all patriots, and strengthen our force in a strong union. I long now to take some rough, hard-working hands in mine. Ah, my boys! I have not suffered in vain. A dark, foul dungeon, brutal blows, and sharp whip-cord have told their tale; the scars are in my heart, and I know how to handle creatures who have sores not yet scarred over. Ah, boys! you look for a leader, and when you find your leader you will follow him

unto death. Well, Ossinman, I am reflecting aloud—a bad habit. In a few days I shall be the good citizen Rimboff, culling favours of potentates, plotting, and scheming counter-plots. Adieu! I will see you safely away and shut up my house, and then go to my *sanctum sanctorum*, of which even you know nothing. Such is life! The warnings to friends are in your hands; carry them out with discretion.'

'One word more.' Ossinman looked hard at Rimboff as he continued cautiously,—'Have you ever suspected Nief of playing a double game?'

'To his profit he would play a triple game. Understand me. He would do as we do—hold and gain secrets of two parties, and would betray the side that would answer his purpose best. What cause have you to suspect him?'

'He is working for our cause now, and for the people.'

Rimboff was distressed by this news. Not a muscle in his face denoted his feelings, but he hissed through his teeth,—

'Then he will turn traitor to them. Avoid him as you would a pestilence; make him neither friend nor foe. Give me your reason for thinking he works for us and the people.'

'I shrink from replying. My nature seems so debased by—'

'Come, come. Never mind the high-water mark of purity. Speak without reserve. Do we

not say one dirty hand washes the other, and both become clean? See, my hand tells its tale of work; take it, Ossinman, and I swear you secrecy.'

'I will. Nief sought me, and placed with me the paper in cypher that I now hold, trusting to my ability to give a solution to its meaning.'

'And what else?' asked Rimboff, outwardly calm, but his thoughts were forming themselves in quick succession, and pointing to immediate action.

'I discovered he was in total ignorance of our cypher, and that he considered me innocent of all party opinion or political views. I encouraged his conclusions.'

'We are in time to act against him. The cypher, doubtless, on the paper is the proclamation that is to be printed at one of our secret presses, and to see daylight a month hence simultaneously from one end of the empire to the other, as a proof of the unity of our widespread organisation, and as our appeal to our countrymen and our rulers. Is this to be frustrated by Nief? How did he obtain the paper?'

'From Madame Verge.'

'Then this deception means his life or mine; or, more clearly put, the triumph of his cause or mine. Nief shall rue the day he put himself at my mercy. Your suspicion sleeps, Ossinman, if you fail to see that Nief must be crushed. Oh, that the world were rid of Nief! But now,

at all hazards I must go to my post and speak truths to my countrymen, and leave Nief in your power. Alas! he is your friend. Beware, he is a traitor in our camp.'

'To serve you, I will keep my appointment to meet him, and will give him any false copy I may make of the cypher. If I were base I could criminate him, and set the police on his track.'

'Ossinman, we will fight fair, and let the police into no secret. My tone of life has sharpened my wits. Take your Madame Verge to my house at St Petersburg; there I will worm out if she is an instrument in Nief's hands. See to this matter, and if she is one of us, she will know this sign and act upon it.'

Rimboff wrote a sign on a blank card, and gave it to Ossinman.

'Take care of your health, Ossinman. I speak a warning. I would you were robust; yet such a mind as yours is seldom attached to a burly frame.'

Ossinman shrugged his shoulders. He never spoke of himself. Whence he came, whither he went was unknown; he lived a solitary life. He answered curtly,—

'I will warn valued friends, and take Madame Verge to St Petersburg.'

The door closed, and shut him out of sight, and he walked on his road, with weak, halting steps, in the darkness of night.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN EVENING ON THE NEVA.

'What you keep by you, you may change and mend;
But words once spoken can never be recall'd.'

ROSCOMMON.

IT was about the hour of sunset. A bright, rosy clearness shed a glorious glow as the departing day was quickly being numbered with the past.

Upon the broad waters of the Neva played a tinge of colouring that rendered it golden and red; as it mirrored the heavens in the deep reflections of its waning lights. All bespoke the beauties of the coming evening. A calm and soul-touching time, in which the mind awakens anew to feel how beautiful is the world, in its ever-varying aspects, under the many gradations from light to shade, and to dusky night.

In the middle of the river, a boat holding two persons glided slowly along. The man was sculling, and the woman had her eyes fixed in-

tently upon him; they were silent. At length the man ceased to pull, and, resting on his sculls, he let the boat float on with the stream. Still he was silent, absorbed in deep thought.

His cause was in peril. A cause that impelled him to resist his dearest inclinations, and fix as his chief and highest goal worthy attainment, the regeneration of his people. He believed in the achievements of great ends, enduring and peace-giving. He had chosen a dangerous path, and he determined to struggle through it, aided by the spirit of the purest patriotism; no cupidity alloyed his actions; he cared neither for power nor riches; he envied nobody; had no desire for fame; his purpose was lofty, and he was willing to sacrifice himself to it, not as a fanatic, but as a noble worker in a patriotic cause.

It was a dangerous spark this man was trying to kindle, but when once the fire came he would have courage to fan the flame, even though he were consumed in the heat. Who was he, that he should not sacrifice himself as a mean instrument for a gigantic good!

A new fear had risen within him. There were many autocratic partisans who loved riches and power, and he knew how far envy and bribes might work together to ruin him. His guards against such evils must be strong, and to make them so he must act alone, in divers

places, always nameless, and in various disguises.

Such now were Peter Rimboff's resolutions as he sat silently by his wife,—a silence that had followed his suggestion that they must separate again, and perhaps for ever. Her response had been that she would die at his side, but alive would never leave him.

Madame Rimboff had escaped arrest only by the skin of her teeth ; Count Narodisky had not been so fortunate, and his liberty was cut off until the authorities were satisfied of his non-complicity in concealing foes to the state, even though they might be his personal friends.

Rimboff's movements were hampered by his wife. He felt he was a coward when he found harm threaten her. He had thought all softness of heart had left him, until he found his wife acting voluntarily in his cause, not for the love of the cause, but for the love of him. That was too great a sacrifice. To die for one's country was noble, but to die for an individual was an act of romantic folly, worthy Ossinman's heroes or heroines, and which he worked as an artistic dream into a beautifully woven and well-blended tale, where the threads must be snapped off to suit the pattern he wished to produce, and to give sensational interest.

Rimboff would not allow a romantic folly to be enacted by his wife, and the part that she

was playing must end. He foresaw danger to his plans in the double secrecy he had to maintain in his own and his wife's movements. *He* could walk his course safely, but through a blind infatuation his wife might trip in hers. Though it pained him, yet for the love he bore his wife he must separate himself from her for ever.

Whilst thus Peter Rimboff was leaning on his sculls, the boat drifted as the stream took it. On the border of the river were three men, who had raised the question as to the right of prior claim to a boat they wished to enter; no other boat was at their disposal, and this was the last plying for hire. One man had spoken first; one had touched the boat first; and one had stepped boldly into it, but he had not gained the sculls. Possession being many points in his favour, the man kept his place, and invited the two other disputants to share the boat and its expense, if to go up stream would suit them, as that was the course he intended to make.

The invitation was accepted, and the man who gave it rowed himself and the strangers in the direction he had indicated. Then he made his course into the middle of the river, without exchanging a word with his companions. Suddenly, to the painful surprise of his victim, one of his companions turned on the other, grappling his throat as he said fiercely,—'I owe you

a debt; I will pay you. You would betray my friend! No; not now, I hold you firm in my grip.'

The attack was so quick that to parry it was impossible, and the grip was so strong that the victim was rendered powerless to shake off his assailant.

The man who was sculling had a hard task to keep the boat in some degree steady, and he thundered out loudly in Russ,—

'You lunatic! Let go your hold instantly!'

The answer was made also in Russ,—

'Not until I have wrung the breath out of this vile body. I know my man. Ah! he gets black in the face. I pay with interest!' The Tartar blood was up, and the prey had no chance of escape.

The sculler felt at the mercy of a madman, and feared, when sufficient mischief had been played on his present victim, he might next be attacked. He called loudly for help as he saw Rimboff's boat, and he pulled towards it.

Rimboff heard the cry. Not knowing in what manner he was to render aid, he took his sculls in hand and rowed towards the man who gave the cry of distress; and for the moment ceased to rack his mind with tormenting thoughts on state, or revolutionary, or domestic matters.

'If you will not be strangled, you shall be

drowned!' said the excited man, as he dragged his victim to the edge of the boat. The sufferer was almost unconscious, and quite powerless to protect himself, the effects of suffocation working heavily against him. The boat, untrimmed, floated unevenly, and it was beyond the sculler's power to counter-balance the weight of the struggling man with his burden; she swayed aside, and her living freight was immersed in the river.

Rimboff came nearer and nearer, and succeeded in laying hold of the empty boat. The sculler rose first to the surface of the water, and he made for Rimboff's boat.

'You can swim; save yourself in your own boat,' said Rimboff, firmly.

'Clear ourselves first of those men — row away,' gasped out the man in broken sentences, as he scrambled into Rimboff's boat.

'Coward!' said Rimboff, as he saw the supposed madman rise to the surface, still holding on to his victim; 'help me to save your friends. I will let your boat drift.'

Rimboff rowed nearer the two men; one could swim, and he was now holding the man he had endeavoured to strangle by the sleeve of his coat, which he grasped tightly between his teeth.

'Hold on a minute longer, and both are saved,' shouted Rimboff, and in that instant he

saw the man who was upheld was Nief. Nief, his greatest enemy, a man the world would be well rid of to its advantage.

Rimboff was not cruel—he could face death bravely; but to see even his enemy, Nief, meet his death by accident, and yet be able to prevent such an end, was not in his heart, and he felt he would with justice be pointed at as his murderer. Nief was in distress, and Rimboff would succour him, and rowing near to the men, he caught Nief by the collar, and held him firmly.

The man who had attacked Nief let go his hold; his tongue thus released, he used it freely.

'Does he still live?' he asked in a tone of frenzy.

The man's question Rimboff mistook to mean anxiety for Nief's welfare, and he said, 'Get him into the boat quickly; we can do nothing for him here.'

'Not so. Wait an instant. Does he live?' and the man looked eagerly a few seconds into Nief's set eyes, and exclaimed, 'Oh! they dilate! He lives!'

Rimboff had a mixed feeling when he heard the words; still he would save Nief from death, and he urged the man again. 'Quick, quick! I may rescue him yet, with your help.'

A moment's pause. The man looked wildly at Rimboff. 'I will save my friend alone,' he

said, and an instant after Nief was dragged suddenly beneath the water; the man dived with him, and they rose again at some distance off, near to the empty boat that had drifted away from Rimboff. The man held on to the boat as he kept Nief's head under water until he felt sure that he ceased to live, and let him drop as a log to meet the river's bed as his restless grave; then he swam towards the bank of the river.

As the speck of the swimmer's black head became indistinct, the man who had sculled this strange crew was sitting beside Madame Rimboff, and was much disconcerted by the questions put to him by Rimboff.

Rimboff rowed in the track of the swimming man, and tried to read aright the cause of the apathy of his companion. Was he culpable, or dazed and bewildered by his sudden immersion and the scene that followed? Or was it possible that he was selfish, and concerned only with his own preservation? So absorbed was Rimboff conjecturing the position of this stranger, that he gave no thought to his wife, who had covered her head and face with her shawl as if to shut out the miserable scene.

'Do you wish to abandon your friends?' asked Rimboff.

The man now answered with decision. 'One man is dead, and the other, mad as he is, swims

well, and may reach the bank quickly. As I have already told you, they are not my friends; I am ignorant of their names or conditions. I met them by accident.'

'That may be true.'

'May be! It is true as gospel, I owe them nothing, but to you I am greatly indebted; my life, next to God, I owe to you. Had you delayed, two victims would have fallen to the madman's frenzy. Accept grateful thanks for rescuing me. My gratitude shall not end in words only; a bond of lasting value has sprung up between us.'

'I have but done my duty; your safety assured, I am repaid; your present thanks in words is all I need. I have another duty: I must report this evening's incident to the proper authorities. If what you say is true, that the attack was made unprovoked, the man must render his account of the *fracas*. It is a serious matter; life is lost.'

'The man is a raving madman, too dangerous to encounter again. Better row well away from him, and report him to the police, now his victim is beyond our help.'

'My duty is first to trace the madman and pick him up if he is exhausted, then leave him in the hands of the police.'

'Let me dissuade you from touching that fierce lunatic.'

'No; I see my course clearly, and shall follow it.'

The evening shades were deepening, and all trace of the man was lost. Had his black head disappeared under the water, or had he managed to swim to the bank, neither Rimboff nor his mysterious companion could decide; all that was clear, was the absence of the black head from the surface of the water as a guiding dot.

As Madame Rimboff was silent and muffled, her agitation was hidden from her companions, but it existed, and became so great that she could scarcely restrain her limbs from trembling, and her teeth from chattering, as she endeavoured to keep her condition from being observed. How well she knew the voice that spoke to her husband! How difficult she felt her position! Every moment she feared some awkward recognition of her might be made. She was nearly suffocated, but through the slight opening she perforce allowed in the folds of her shawl over her face to admit a little air, she studied the countenance of the man to see if he showed that he had any knowledge of her husband.

Sometimes she thought, as the stranger's clear, hazel eye seemed to rest long on Rimboff's face, that the look of recognition was in them; but her fears were unfounded, the man alone was thinking of his own safety, and reflecting over the circumstances that had just happened. He was fully alive to the fact that, true as his

tale was, it seemed open to grave suspicion, and there was no witness to corroborate his testimony. It was clear that he had not committed the murder, but that he instigated it, came forcibly to his mind as a possible suspicion difficult to fight against. In a word, he found himself in a hard perdicament, but intended to show no sort of fear in giving full particulars of the last hour's work that he had witnessed; and towards the quarters of police authorities the boat was quickly carrying him.

Of the three who formed this now silent party, Rimboff alone showed no excitement, as he made for a rough landing-stage, but his coolness and sense of duty were not to last long, as events quickly proved.

In Madame Rimboff's agitated state, and in steadying herself as she stepped on the landing-stage, her shawl fell aside and her features were disclosed. In that instant she was recognised.

'Vera,' said the man who had been seated by her in the boat, and who was now on the landing-stage and assisting her to step upon it; 'Vera, have you not known me all this time?'

'Hush, not so loud,' said Madame Rimboff,—fearing a word more dangerous might be spoken before the few people who were near her.

'Pray leave me now—yes, leave us.'

'Not so. The world is wicked, but I did not expect you—'

'Do, do go away! The easiest manner for you to escape distrust and suspicion is to go away with your tale untold. It is already dusk, and there are no witnesses to this foul plot, except those who will keep your secret.'

The man stared in mute astonishment, but his brain was working busily that he might understand his position, but he had no thought of going away. What had he to fly from? A woman's fears! based on what—his or her safety? formed a question quickly to his mind. He was still rooted to the spot when Rimboff stepped on the landing-stage, after he had secured his boat firmly for the night, as he did not find the man to whom he usually gave it into keeping. Rimboff now had but one thought pre-eminent—that of giving a direct account to the officials of his adventure; but to prevent a hue and cry being raised among the bystanders, he was reticent, and made no passing allusion to it, to be overheard.

When Rimboff joined his wife, the man looked hard into his face; he was trying to recall a countenance that he had not seen for years. It came clearly to him. The care Rimboff had taken to disguise his adult face by shaving off all whisker and beard, and leaving only a well-trimmed moustache, brought to recollection the face of his youth, and the fatal word that morning, noon, and night haunted

Rimboff broke suddenly on his ear, as the man said,—

'Krainsky! in truth, Krainsky!'

'Where? Follow him quick! His head is worth a high price. I will help to capture him.'

Not a jot of Rimboff's presence of mind deserted him, and he looked right and left before he made an appearance of leading an imaginary pursuit. He then moved quickly away from the small knot of people who might possibly have heard the sound of a name that a few years before was in every mouth and mind, as belonging to a dangerous man, whom everybody was bent upon hounding down.

Rimboff dreaded that he had to meet a danger perilous to himself, if he could not elude the recognition of this man. At any risk he must persuade him that he was mistaken, and fly from the men who now surrounded him, but not from the man who had called him by name.

Madame Rimboff clung tightly to her husband's arm, as he walked quickly from the man who owed his life to him, and in return, by an imprudent word, might sacrifice her husband. That man was not deceived by Rimboff's words, but his error in having uttered the name of Krainsky struck him forcibly, yet he knew he made no error in thinking the man who saved his life was Krainsky. His features and voice were as he remembered them of old. Yet

Krainsky had just saved him from death, and in return, he must save Krainsky from pain and trouble—perhaps from a long imprisonment. Gratitude was strong in this man's heart. Shivering in his wet clothes, he followed closely on the heels of his deliverer. Rimboff turned towards the man saying,—

'If you still see Krainsky, take the lead; his name alone is known to me. Go quietly; I will follow, and we shall have two tales to tell the police—your own and his.'

No casual hearers were near, and Rimboff wished to see his enemy before him, and to test how well or ill his device had succeeded.

'I see him still,' was the man's reply, as he passed in advance of Rimboff.

Madame Rimboff was in difficulty how to break the ice that prevented her husband and the man before her swimming in clear water together. She knew the man so well, that he was not of the same farina as her husband, that he had a personal hatred of him, and was a strong antagonist to all revolutionary action. She knew, too, that her husband was conversant of these facts, and now it was her aim to disclose the position this man held in connection with him. How he would receive her news was so uncertain that she decided to test the strength of her ground before she placed her burden upon it.

The distance between Rimboff and his *bête noir* grew wider, and Madame Rimboff ventured to speak,—

'It is well to be cautious, yet you may not have so much to dread from that man as you fear. Would it lighten your misery if I suggest that that man may be a relation of mine?'

'Not a bit! Relations are not synonymous with friends. I would never trust relations, simply on the plea of relationship.'

'Oh, Demetrius! Why?'

'I have known a bribe taken through a brother's betrayal.'

'Then the brother must have been poor indeed!'

'Poorer in spirit than in pocket. I have seen this, too,—a rich man love money so heartily that he ceased to be honest. If that strange man were my father, he should not know me by my name. Vera, you will not betray me!'

Madame Rimboff was facing the horns of a dilemma. Which was she to brave? She chose to face her husband's tossing first, and said,—

'Let me tell you who that man is?'

'I do not wish to hear his name, his relationship, or your knowledge of him. In strict sincerity I must tell the police he is an utter stranger to me. He turns towards us. Be mum.'

Madame Rimboff left her husband as he stopped abruptly, and awaited the stranger.

'I am chilly,' she said, as she muffled her face again under her shawl.

'I have no time to think of such trifles,' replied Rimboff, as Madame Rimboff hurriedly passed the stranger.

The man stood beside Rimboff, and said, in a confidential tone,—

'I have been weighing the fearful incidents of this evening, and, though the matter is serious, I have formed a conclusion as to a fairly expedient mode of action. Have you come to any conclusion on your part?'

'To follow up Krainsky, then to report the misadventure, fight, accident, or murder that I have witnessed.'

A quiet smile played on the man's face as he heard Rimboff speak calmly and try to hold his ground without a nerve in his face betraying him.

'If agreeable to you, let us walk whilst we talk, for my wet clothes chill me. We are virtually alone, therefore I will speak unreservedly. You have rendered me this day so great a service in saving my life, that the debt of gratitude it entails upon me will be lifelong, and you may claim from me any service that for your good I can render you at any time and at any place. I have now but to make known to you—'

'Pardon me interrupting you. You are a stranger to me. Until after I have given my information to the police, let me not even know your name. This is the first favour I ask you to grant me; possibly I may never ask you another.'

'I see, we are to talk under considerable reserve.'

The man paused some time,—his intentions were frustrated by the answer Rimboff made, and he altered his plans.

'If you do not know my name now, you soon will. Your wife knows me. But I grant your favour—your reason may be just that requires it. Still, I will be no dissembler. I will speak fairly and shortly. Not another mortal shall know that I have met Krainsky but yourself—the name shall never pass my lips,—but you are he, body and soul, I know full well; and as well do I know that you will not confirm this. Your actions are plain enough. Demetrius Krainsky, this matter shall rest for ever. I shall never divulge that we have met; one favour alone I ask you in return, let the deed of the madman or avenger of a foul play be brought to light by other means than those we had proposed. The whole incident seems like a wild dream to me, and meeting you gives a dangerous bearing to it. I think my proposition is fair. Let no information be

given to the police on this painful subject. When the drowned man is missed, then we can act as justice may require.'

Rimboff reflected long before he answered,—

'There is some force in your argument that commends it to my mind. Your position is equivocal; you alone know if you can clear yourself. I know no more than I have witnessed. A murder has been committed, and you were in company of the murderer. I accept the statement you have made, but the authorities would look aghast if you expected them to believe your statement. If you desire at some future time to aid justice, and will be strictly honest to your word, I will not make it my business to report my little entanglement in this unfortunate matter to the police authorities. As you suspect the blood of the dead man will cry aloud for justice, watch for that cry, and aid it by your statement of facts. So let that matter rest. As to your delusion that I am a man whose very existence now is doubted, I pass as a matter of no importance, and in which I have no interest. In these brief words do we understand our positions?'

'Most clearly.'

'Then if I can render you no further assistance, we will separate now, as nameless to each other as we met.'

'So abrupt a dismissal makes me form decided conclusions. Distrust in your case is natural, yet I shall always faithfully fulfil my promise, and remember this vow I now make, *to assist you at all times, however hazardous or difficult may be the accomplishment of the project.* My debt with you will only end with my life.'

The man raised his still wet hair, and disclosed a bald patch on his head, that was seamed in many ways in cross seams, a cicatrix indicating an injury of a severe nature, and of many years' standing.

'Look at that scar,' said he; 'the blow that caused that nearly sent me to my grave, and the man who gave it, probably thinks I am resting there. I forgive him, and care only to forget the time I knew him. A woman saved me from being put aside as dead to die outright. She succoured me, and until her death I lavished on her all the kindness she deserved. My feelings are not less aroused to gratitude now, and I shall ever be at your command. Thus actuated, you will believe me that I feel some pain in parting from you with so faint a hope of meeting again.'

Rimboff's good feelings were touched, but he allowed them not to influence him. To a man who had been accustomed as he to harsh natures, and had seen much of the rough side

of life, these last words bespoke the freshness of a genuine impulse, acting on a fine mind; but Rimboff coldly hid his true appreciation of the man's gratitude, and said,—

'The hope is not faint, but vain. It is better so. Can I aid you further?'

'No, thanks; our interest ceases in each other, but my debt remains: ever remember it is life long.'

'It is paid already. Possibly your home is near, and you will take little harm from your impromptu bath.'

'My home!' said the man sadly. 'Yes, my home is always near, and never stationary. I am seeking, for ever seeking. I have a trouble. Who has not some bitter trouble? I keep you from Madame. Adieu.'

The man put out his hand, and Rimboff took it with a warm pressure, and released his hold, never uttering a word of farewell.

So these men parted. One a millionaire, possessing land, houses, mines, forests—each a source of income; an estate on which he nominally lived, roaming hither and thither in search of a child who might inherit his immense wealth at his death. Where was this misguided youth? Perhaps imprisoned, exiled, or roaming the world in poverty he knew not, and the millionaire had thus his grievance. The other, a man enriched by stolen wealth, fevered with a mania

that allured him to test his powers to regenerate an empire,—to work the work of a century in his own brief lifetime,—to labour to awake the ignorant to see their wrongs, that they in their ignorance knew not to be wrongs, and to press them on to claim redress for grievances that they, being 'born to the manner,' had borne without irritation; and tempted to feel it were possible to hold the balance of power and justice, even in a land where peculation and bribery were rampant, and but faintly disguised.

> 'Bold is the task, when subjects, grown too wise,
> Instruct a monarch where his error lies;
> For though we deem the short-lived fury past,
> 'Tis sure, the mighty will revenge at last.'

This task Rimboff did not flinch from undertaking, and to work out by subtle means and bold plans.

CHAPTER XIX.

OSSINMAN AT MOSCOW AND NIJNY-NOVGOROD.

'The only disadvantage of an honest heart is credulity.'—SIR P. SIDNEY.

MADAME RIMBOFF yielded to her husband's demands in a compromise. She refused to leave Russia, but left St Petersburg for his residence at Yalta.

Peter Rimboff was seldom at Yalta, but it was expedient at this moment that his house at St Petersburg should be closed, and the fashionable meetings that crowded his salon should end. The capital was gay in its season, and on the plea of illness Madame Rimboff suddenly left it for the south of Russia. Thus, though Peter Rimboff did not go to Yalta, his absence from St Petersburg created no wonder among his friends, and gave him time to work with his 'boys' as a propagandist of the principles of freedom, and to search out the flaw that pre-

vented his plans carrying his minor aims to completion.

Madame Rimboff made the journey over that wide expanse of flat country between St Petersburg and Moscow with her husband, and at Moscow parted from him with these words that he felt might be prophetic, 'I go to peace and quietude, but you to meet fraud and ingratitude; you wrong yourself in the vain hope to adjust the wrongs of strangers.'

Peter Rimboff had been warned that he was under surveillance, yet he would not consent to be concealed among his friends, for he had faith in his power to quiet suspicion; this power he would test, and be free to act without trammels to his actions. He knew he could conceal himself in his underground cellar, dark, and secret, and work there; and at night emerge from it, as a mole, by the burrowed way that was yet undetected. How well Rimboff knew Burke's theory:—the nerve that never relaxes, the eye that never blenches, the thought that never wanders—these are the masters of victory.

Ossinman was at Moscow, ill and weak. He had sauntered out in a clear, bright evening. He loitered on the bridge that spans the Moskva, for the Kremlin tower was an object that struck him as possessing beauty. Its heavy base and spire were sharply defined under the white gleaming moonshine, and its near

neighbour, the Church of Our Saviour, was lighted by the moon's rays that played on the cupola, and marked it more vividly as the light fleecy clouds cleared off the disc of the night's queen. Peter Rimboff, too, was walking on the bridge, but no thought of Kremlin or moonlight beauty was passing in his mind. He had parted again from his wife to follow a game fraught with more danger than he had hitherto dared.

All absorbed as Rimboff was in thought, Ossinman's thin pale face, with the moonbeams playing on its handsome lines, arrested his attention.

'My friend,' said he (for he had grown careful not to address anyone by name), and he put his hand on Ossinman's shoulder, 'I have missed you. Why did you leave me without any clue to lead me to you?'

'Did I leave you so? Since I saw you I have been almost dead, Rimboff. I have strolled out now to breathe fresh air: I have got weary of pain and my room. My physician would deprecate this freak of mine, but I seemed impelled to leave the house; and I have guarded against the evils of the night by wearing extra coats, and they are all too heavy for me. I am better here than groaning in misery on my bed; and I meet you once again.'

'Under whose care are you?'

'My own.'

'This is no evening for a sick man to face direct from his bed. Ossinman, I know when a man's eye is too bright, and face pale and thin, that that man wants help beyond his own self-help. I plan quickly. You know Madame Verge?'

'Too well. My illness is due to that cruel chill I took when I gave her my cloak months ago; the gift was for the good of the cause, and it saved her.'

'How have you suffered for that unselfish act?'

'How! The cold struck my chest, and caused congestion of the lungs, but I roamed about, getting weaker and weaker. I was with —well, suffice it—friends. Delirium came upon me, but I spoke truth in my wandering talk, and my friends, not knowing if my words were all trash or not, followed out some of my crude utterances to the letter, and found we had, as you had suspected, a traitor in our midst. I hear he is stifled now. You have lost a strong enemy, and our cause has gained a stronger position.' A ghastly smile played on the wan features of Ossinman, as he said, 'I am amply repaid for my sufferings and the loss of my cloak. The air is getting too strong for me, I must leave you and again seek rest in my room.'

'Who is stifled, Ossinman?' asked Rimboff, more interested as a patriot than as a vigilant friend of the sick man.

'Nief. But I know nothing, and have no means to find out the truth of the report. Nief's name reminds me you mentioned the name of Verge. Did you find Madame Verge true?'

'I did, Ossinman, and—'

Ossinman had been supporting himself by leaning against the parapet of the bridge, and when he attempted to walk, he staggered as a drunken man. Rimboff held him by the arm, and found it so emaciated that he said feelingly,—

'Ossinman, you must be cared for properly. When we leave the bridge, I will drive with you to your rooms, even if it be a secret home; you may trust me.'

Ossinman's weakness forced him to accede to this suggestion, that gave Rimboff means to play a game to his benefit.

Rimboff left Ossinman alone in his room that night, but Madame Verge became his companion and nurse for several days at Moscow, and her journey south under the name of Rimboff was postponed.

A week sufficed for Ossinman to gain sufficient strength to start for Yalta by a circuitous route and easy stages.

It was *en route* from Moscow to Nijny-Novgorod that Madame Rimboff disclosed to Ossinman her position, and acknowledged she was Peter Rimboff's wife.

Nothing surprised Ossinman. He attached little importance to name, for many of his fellow-workers dropped one and took up another almost daily, if papers and events needed the change. One question he ventured to ask,—

'Are you the mother of the young actress, Madame Verge-Morgane?'

Madame Rimboff's answer to the question was evasive.

'She regarded me as her mother, and I always acted as her guardian.'

For the safety of her husband, the name of Rimboff and Verge must be kept widely distinct, or suspicion might trace the names a step further, and disclose the fatal name of Krainsky.

The charm that Ossinman had attached to Madame Rimboff as Madame Verge was rudely broken; no romance was now connected with her, but some interest existed in her, as she was the wife of the man whom he worshipped and followed as a hero.

Regard for Ossinman grew daily stronger in Madame Rimboff. His clear hazel eyes recalled to her a remembrance of her father, whenever she met their full gaze; and these lustrous eyes had grown so hollow and large, and were so bright, and restless too, under Ossinman's forced quietude, that they seemed to appeal for sympathy, and touched the feeling of pity in Madame Rimboff's heart. As time wore on,

Ossinman had that affectionate respect that a young man often possesses for a kindly-disposed woman who aids him when in a helpless state.

It was a brilliant day at Nijny-Novgorod, some two hundred and seventy miles from Moscow, when Ossinman and Madame Rimboff were on the height, and near the Mouravief tower. They were resting, and feasting their eyes on the splendid views of the surrounding country, and on the winding Volga flowing through a vast plain, stretching on far away into the horizon. They watched, floating on its waters, feighted barges; rafts, with rude huts that served as cabins for their inhabitants; huge barques, of strange construction, with eccentrically ornamented houses on deck, and shrines bedecked with holy pictures, and burning lamps, that, in the night's darkness, would gleam picturesquely, and shine as small bright stars, gliding peacefully on their course, as the steam tugs tow several large and small craft to their destinations, that may be many miles from Nijny-Novgorod.

'You are getting stronger, Ossinman,' said Madame Rimboff, as she noted mentally that he had taken a lively interest in this scene.

'Possibly; but I do not deceive myself; I never shall be strong again. My life is refused by every insurance company, and I look forward to early death myself. Yet, who knows? We

patch up the creaking gates, and they last long.'

'Whilst the gate is being patched, have you any whom you love to tell of its few creaks? A mother, sister, father, or brother?'

Ossinman's pale face grew paler.

'I wish to be alone, unknown, forgotten,' he said, and then checked himself. 'I had a sister whom I loved; I would that she sometimes thinks of me.'

'And you wish to see her,' said Madame Rimboff quickly.

'That is impossible; she may think of me as dead.'

'An unhappy thought.'

Madame Rimboff felt keenly the words she uttered, for was she not dead to her own child? And she let the conversation drop; and Ossinman dreamed on as he again watched the steam tugs towing the numerous craft on Russia's great water artery, that traverses some two thousand miles in winding a course that enables rich freights of goods, and precious ores from far-off mines, to be carried to given points, and hence to more distant districts.

Ossinman's thoughts wandered in his dreams from the barques and barges to the workers in the mines, and he lashed his heart with many a hard scourge as he thought of his country's laws that, to his mind, banished the flower of its land to life-long degradation for fostering pro-

gress, and the widely-recognised right principles of just government. And he dreamed on of a future time, when Russia's rulers would see wisdom in obeying the 'eternal laws' that Sophocles held to be equity tempered with mercy and piety; and in this dream he saw his countrymen happy and his country prosperous.

Madame Rimboff took Vera's letters from her satchel. It was her solace to read them at quiet moments, and whilst Ossinman dreamed life away she read them through—it might be for the hundredth time, still the charm in them was fresh.

Extracts taken from these letters will show how the actress was racked with anxious cares whilst she hit to the life the sweet, gentle consciousness of a first love, as the blushing girl listening to her lover's words of hope; and, to follow her *rôle*, became, as true to life, the vengeful woman against her deceiver. Equally well would she personate a queen defending herself in the presence of her husband, with all the dignity and power that a virtuous woman could command, and true to Katherine, and with the soul of the queen seeming to be in her. Faithful to character would she become the poor outcast, and weep with heart-felt dejection, and speak words of pathos so to accord with misery that the sensation she created expressed how deeply she wrung the hearts of her

hearers. As true to nature would she become the wild, giddy, laughing hoiden; the murderer carrying the cup of poison or the dagger, and with stealthy step go forth to do a vile deed, and give expression to her features to suit a wicked act. Vera as the actress was ever in her part—she loved, hated, wept, laughed, and sinned with the earnest feeling that touched her heart, even as the motive power of her actions; and the sway she had over thousands of admirers, impelled her to triumph over herself, and crush the misery out of her own condition, that often was one of mental agony. But this triumph was achieved at a heavy cost, as Vera's own words written in a cheerless tone will testify.

Extract 1. 'Bishop Donwell is in London. He lectured me, his subject was coquetry. He is too courteous to speak plainly, yet I knew the pattern of the cap he was trying to shape to my head; but I made that head vanish, as I agreed with him in all he said. I would not wear his cap; I smiled when he looked grave, for I detected he had a fervid temperament, and a quick perception, and report gives him rare talents. The ideas he suggested in the scintillation of his humour did not make me forget my guards. I met all his heavy shot as imponderable missiles lighter than air. I like the Bishop; he is not supercilious or sarcastic:

his serenity and humour have quite won my heart.'

Extract 2. 'I love Bishop Donwell. I find I have a friend in its most thorough meaning, in him. He is so noble and sincere. Of course our talk is mostly of that miserable land Malavita, and Athie, whom the Bishop loves as a brother. I talk, too, of my little and great cares, and the Bishop's frank face never bespeaks that he is bored. The shadow of a Bishop hovering over me gives me strength, but I care little for it. Let the narrow ring of society keep aloof from me, let me live within the still narrower ring of my friends who know me. A desire to tolerate me has been shown by some of my late acquaintances who were Athie's friends. I may be wrong, dearest mother, but I will not be tolerated. Lady Sea bowed to me; I was far too near-sighted to see her; the colour came to her face, deeper than her rouge, but I would not let the faintest sneer pass over mine. I do not depend on the aristocracy, or any distinct class, for my popularity, my special gift from God makes me the idol of the hour.'

Extract 3. 'I receive no answers to my letters, dear mother, but this you must answer. Athie is writing extraordinary letters; the Bishop has read them, and the truth is out: I possess a jealous husband! How am I to manage him? Am I to let his jealous fit die out, or am I to

accede to his whims? The Bishop's advice, if followed, would be the death-blow to my nice little sociable suppers at the "Minerva." He was present at one supper, and he can give no better reason for the advice to discontinue them, than, "it is my husband's wish that they should end." He reasoned as a man, I as an actress. I explained that as the sparkle of champagne continues after the first effervescence, so the excitement of acting cannot die out momentarily after the culminating point is reached, and fall to a blank, solitary dumbness; it must wane away, and fall more gradually, under the influence of a little laughter and talking. Oh, mother, it is all so innocent! I instituted my suppers to keep my nerves in health. Indeed I should have become hypochondriacal had I not had some congenial and cheerful amusement as a vent to my natural disposition. I do not wish to live on excitement—far from that—but I cannot sacrifice myself to solitude! Do tell me what I should do. I dread so much that my health may suffer if I dwell too much on my home disappointments, as I often have not the spirit, after acting, to do more than drive direct home, with the din of applause ringing in my ears, and after writing to Athie, sob so violently that I alarm myself, and sleep only when utterly exhausted. What will be the effect on my acting if I become despondent, weak, and miserable? And again,

dear mother, for this reason you must answer this letter. Please write all you know of that little adventure at Fellby and Boss. I allude to the walk I so much enjoyed early in the morning. Write all you know of that foreigner whom you frightened into believing I had drowned myself. I do not remember his name, and doubt very much if I ever heard it. Try and recall to mind all the incidents of that day, and give me the result. This is great rubbish to trouble you about, but rubbish as it is, that walk, breakfast, and foreigner prey on poor Athie's happiness as much as if I had committed great crimes. I fear Athie is very unhappy. I hope the sequel to this jealous fit may be return to England; if only his love equals his jealousy, he soon may, for he is a creature of impulse.'

Extract 4. 'I have submitted to all Athie's whims, because he is far away; could I reason with him, all would be different. My little suppers are over. Ralph, who has been so good to me, understands that we may act together, but he is never to be my guest. Now Romany is my only friend. I am not forbidden to ride him yet. What may follow is only known to the gods: nobody here can guess. Now, dear mother, you may think of me passing my time thus:—I breakfast early, dressed in my habit; I pocket sundry lumps of sugar for my pets; I

meet on my door-step Reni, Francisca, and Dürer (who are now combed and brushed at the stables every morning), all gay and handsome, waiting for their sweets, and Romany looks round to be remembered; I give him his goody, mount him, and, with my pets following me, make my morning ride, accompanied by my groom. I will not allow Ralph to meet me, for in all things I wish to be true, dearest mother. I rehearse and act—or only act, then return home to enjoy (?) looking at my empty chairs and sitting at my table with supper laid for one. Yes; I eat my supper, as a rule. After supper, I subside, and listen to the ticking of my clock: that is the only sound that disturbs my utter solitude. That sound may cease; I may have to stop the ticking, for it seems to increase in tone, and the loudness of the tick-tack irritates me by its monotony. This style of life cannot last for ever; there is in it the sort of dead calm that forebodes a storm.'

Extract 5. 'As my letters are not returned to me, I conclude you receive them, and yet, dearest mother, you do not answer them. I know you were a bad correspondent, but I feel sure you are glad to hear all that concerns me. Under that impression, I write again. I have been obliged to call on Dr. Clearall. I am growing nervous, but he assures me I only require change of scene and agreeable society.

I must act for a fortnight from this, or the loss will be great, and I cannot victimise Ralph, who would bear it. When free, I shall be the guest of Sir John Donwell nominally, but the dear Bishop asked him to give me this invitation.'

Extract 6. 'I am in love with Briand Hall; but I have to make an effort to talk and laugh, and keep the blues hidden, and try to look something brighter than a woman with a wrecked life, as an act of gratitude to my friends. Sir John Donwell was Athie's father's friend when a boy. At the time the Bishop was Athie's tutor, Sir John did not possess Briand Hall; he succeeded to that and a fortune more recently. I have been told a great deal of the past and present of the Morgane family, but Sir John has not cleared the mystery that led Mr Morgane to banish Athie from his home as a criminal. I am sure, mother, a reason stronger than Athie's marriage with an actress caused that harsh act.'

Extract 7. 'When I left Briand Hall I was less unhappy than when I went. Possibly, as I am not likely to cry when I attempt to laugh, my nerves are stronger; yet I have still a constant dread that a very undefined something is to happen. Mrs Morgane comes frequently to see me. Her character puzzles me. Which is her true character—her past or present? It is difficult to decide. Her past was all softness

and submission to Mr Morgane, whom Athie considered his mother regarded as a sort of divinity; her present is harsh and arrogant, and she takes the lead in all matters and treats her former divinity as her slave.'

Extract 8. 'I am sorry I have been behind the scenes at Magna House, yet disillusion has a value, even though it carries pain with it. A visitor frequents that house, in whom there is a mystery; a man who has travelled over nearly all the civilised world, totally uneducated and coarse in manner. In his dress he is scrupulously neat, and in face and figure he might pass for a gentleman; there this grade ends, and under this surface nothing is refined or trained. On several occasions Mrs Morgane has entertained this man alone, and for many hours. This is beyond my capacity to reconcile satisfactorily with the rules and order of her house. I am told this man is a rich Colonial who visits sick costermongers; but I do not believe this specious tale. I had thought when Mrs Morgane sought me that I could love her for dear Athie's sake, but I am disappointed. Alas! it is but another anticipated joy shivered, another tender tie coarsely torn asunder. I loath Athie's mother. I have had so much to make my heart ache, dear mother,—so many rulers who would guide me, and sycophants to serve me, that, as Voltaire says somewhere, so I say, "O

Allah! why hast thou not made me an owl?" I should live free in my hole and eat mice at my ease, without masters or servants. At first I followed Athie's mother's advice, but I found her clever in artifices, and, like an owl, I am not so stupid as I look. I am not duped; I feign blindness, but mistrust her in all her actions.'

Extract 9. 'Bishop Donwell has just left England. I am sure he will make peace between Athie and me. We need him as a mediator, and I shall be glad when he has finished his work in a happy ending. It is so hard to have only bitter thoughts for companions. I talk to my dogs; my marmosets are growing very old and are not lively now—they are more chilly than they were in their younger days. I am now a solitary, "at home" to nobody: writing only of my pets, bespeaks this lonely condition. Like the ancients, I begin to realise that the soul is more where it loves than where it lives, and that it is wise to love moderately. Yet how difficult it is to control one's love! The only step in life that I never consulted you upon, dear mother, was the important one of my marriage. Was my love for Athie an infatuation? I fear this love or infatuation was so strong that my mind was distracted, or I should never have acted without your advice; and now the hour of sober thought comes to me, will

retribution come too in the doubt that I may have loved more rashly than wisely? I must not write my doubts, even to you, mother, that come to me in my loneliness; nor will I imagine evils; I will take to heart only real troubles, and try to think lightly of them. I will not judge Athie harshly—he lives under severe disappointments. But I am now growing rich. Alas! rich in money, but poor in peace. Will fortune never come with both hands full?'

When Madame Rimboff ceased reading she dreamed over her past, and vacantly looked on the Volga's winding course and on the golden corn that was ripening on land which at spring time, covered with water, gave to the Volga the appearance of a vast lake. Following her train of thought, she said abruptly,—

'Ossinman, is it possible to get more letters for me from Madame Verge-Morgane?'

'Under what name?' asked Ossinman quickly.

'Verge. But they must not come direct to Yalta: Verge and Rimboff must never be sounded in the same breath.'

'Possibly I can prevent that; but the letters will be delayed by the circuitous route they must traverse to reach me. Do you take interest in your *protégée*, or are the letters received in our country's interest?'

'No harm is attached to them; they will touch purely on domestic matters. By the way,

what is your surname? I know you only as Ossinman—is that your Christian or surname?

'Both,' said Ossinman laconically.

'Both!'

'Yes,' Ossinman continued, with meaning emphasis. 'We are birds of the same feather—no name can be given to us. In the course of time I may tell you my history; at present, I belong to no family. Has your desire to know my name any further object than to gratify curiosity?'

'My *protégée*, Madame Verge-Morgane, must receive a name and address to send her letters to me, and it must not be the name of Rimboff; and Yalta must not be the place designated.'

'I have one; note it down now—

Madame Verge Ossinman,
Care of Proprietor,
Hotel Tanneuzapfen,
Zürich.'

Ossinman gave this address, and no thought troubled him for future events; he was actuated by a blind confidence in his security, forgetful that a bribe could buy a fabricated letter written by an unknown hand that would lead to disclose more than he desired, and that he had laid a train, or first stepping-stone, to that result.

As Madame Rimboff wrote the address given her on the back of an old letter, she formed a

resolution to ask her husband's sanction to write to Vera, without disclosing her position or dwelling-place.

'You look so weary, Ossinman, we will rest until you get stronger, if you find interest in Nijny-Novgorod.'

'Rather let us make our course south by water. I have looked on the Volga until I long to take steamer to Kazan or Saratov, and from Saratov let us go on to Tzaritsym. My strength will bear better the fatigues of the journey by vessel than by carriage.'

Madame Rimboff agreed to follow out Ossinman's proposition, and as a mother might dictate to her son, made Ossinman leave the height and return to the hotel, and he obeyed her with out questioning the authority she assumed.

CHAPTER XX.

TZARITSYM.

'The most unwise
Will learn their rashness when they pay the price.'
Iliad.—POPE.

OSSINMAN was on the deck of a steamer as it plied its course from Nijny-Novgorod to Kasan. He was carefully tended, even petted, by Madame Rimboff, as he lay full length on his pillows, and covered with soft shawls. His weakness made him self-indulgent, but not exacting, and all the voluntary acts of kindness shown him he received with the courtesy and frank gratitude of a cultured man. He whiled away time in writing, jotting down inspirations that he put aside to be used to his country's good in the form of fiction. When weary of his own thoughts, he would listen to Madame Rimboff as she read aloud Hepworth Dixon's *Russia*, a work that roused him to feel with

greater ardour the real importance that success meant to his work, and the cause he had in hand and at heart.

With hearts and minds full of their country's woes, Madame Rimboff and Ossinman lost all weariness that the banks of the Volga usually inflict upon the seekers of amusement by their extreme monotony. The towns are at long distances apart, but few villages are dotted about, that are of no account in giving interest. The river banks are generally low, but at intervals cliffs rise that give a slight touch of variety to the broad plain that extends farther than the eye reaches.

In spite of the golden domes that ornament the churches, and add a feature of interest to the banks there is a *triste* aspect prevading this grand river, its grandeur existing only in its width and length. Sometimes the steamer passes monasteries raised on well chosen sites, even their gilded cupolas do not relieve the gloominess that surrounds them, but forces on the mind this thought,—that they belong to a past age when progress was slow, and the few within the monastery, by reason of their learning, could minister to the many without its walls ; but now the monks may learn from the people, and gain a wider range of knowledge than ever comes within their scope or discernment in their strict seclusion from the world.

On the banks only of the Volga is dulness; there is stirring life on its waters, and all monotony is broken by craft in constant motion. This busy scene did not cheer Ossinman, the restlessness of a nervous invalid was upon him, and at Kasan Madame Rimboff consented to leave the steamer with him and land for a few days.

Many conflicting reflections troubled Ossinman. As a palliative, he sauntered in the Tartar quarters of Kasan. Kasan was new land to him, and he tried to dispel gloomy forebodings by visiting fresh scenes.

The minaret of a mosque attracted his eye—a picturesque object of lightness, as compared with the heavy cupola of the Russian church, and reminded him of the close touch that existed between the Orient and the West. He entered the mosque with reverence, for in it were worshippers at prayer, and as he looked on their dusky complexions, thoughts recurred to him. How formidable a foe to Russian rule were the ancestors of that Tartar tribe, that had become fellow-subjects with the Slav, and were now at peace, and who were better educated and had greater veracity than their Slavonic fellow-citizens. Alas! a conquered tribe. Then bitter thoughts followed, and Ossinman left the mosque muttering, 'My ancestors were cajoled, not conquered, and now their children suffer

hardships that these men could bear with greater patience. Will these end in my time ?'

Ossinman hesitated when he was again outside the mosque, and as a diversion to his troubled mind he resolved to test the hospitality of the Tartar within his home. He entered a house of moderate pretensions. When he asked permission to rest therein, he found the hospitality genuine and the welcome hearty that was accorded him by its owner. His weak condition engendered compassion, and all that the home contained was freely offered to him for his use. He neither smoked, nor ate, nor drank ; he only talked with his host in so friendly a spirit that he gained an important wrinkle of knowledge, whilst he weakened his feeble strength to a lower grade by the effort it cost him. Someone was in quest of him, seeking him in his proper name. A sickly smile passed over Ossinman's pale face as he heard the news given him haphazard that revealed much to him—he was *not forgotten* at home.

A feeling of remorse struck him, and in Russ he questioned the Tartar further, asking him when the inquiry was made.

The Tartar answered in Russ,—

'Yesterday, by an older man than yourself, and looking quite as ill, ay worse—he was ghastly. He offered a large price for any information that would lead him to the man.

So bear the name in mind, and if you want money, and can bring me news, we may together grasp the man and take the reward.'

The eyes of the Tartar shone brighter as the smack of a possible gain touched his mind, but Ossinman's face grew paler as he said,—

'Possibly the man sought is dead.'

'Find the man. The reward will not be lessened should he be found dead or dying,' said the Tartar, and he rubbed his hands together gleefully, in anticipation of his possible success and reward.

'Ah! so the matter stands. Well, tell me with whom you are to communicate should I hear news worth giving you.'

'No, no; that would be telling you too much; but I will pay liberally if fortune gives you opportunity; by Allah, I will!'

When Ossinman left the Tartar, his thoughts were more confused than when he sought Kazan as a place of solace and diversion. A price was put upon his head! To what end, and by whom? Was he to be inveigled into the false move of returning to his home, and then be handed over to the tender mercies of the State, and branded as a Nihilist? Or, was his father ill, and had he sought him to make his peace with him? No man would seek him except his father, for had he not made himself obscure and poor, unknown to all?

A mystery hung about all he had heard, and he could frame no answers to the questions that circumstances suggested to his mind. He knew there was truth in the Tartar's words, for a name had passed his lips that he had not heard for many years, and had never even acknowledged to Rimboff was his own.

Kasan failed to give Ossinman peace or strength, and when he again joined Madame Rimboff, he yielded to her entreaties that they should go by steamer to Saratov, and, if not fatigued, continue the course to Tzaritsym. By the time Ossinman reached Saratov, he had so far subdued his confused thoughts to order that he was able to form a resolution. When he arrived at Tzaritsym the resolution had taken a practical form, in the shape of a written request and communication. This he gave to Madame Rimboff, although she was near him daily, and could have heard from his lips the contents of the short statement that had cost him many hours' reflection before it gained its present form, couched in the following words :—

'Dear Friend,—Possibly my health fosters in me the wish that you should know circumstances connected with my life that hitherto I have kept strictly secret.

'My mother died when I was a child, but I remember her enough to know she was unhappy,

that I loved her devotedly, and that her death caused me sadness and a feeling of loneliness that lasted until you took interest in me. Again I feel a love as for a mother.

'May I presume on your forbearance and regard, and as a son implicitly relying on a mother's candour, make disclosures that require caution on my part in divulging, and secrecy on your part when known ?

'My reason for hazarding these disclosures is plain, and founded on doing a just act ; my request in asking secrecy is actuated by similar motives—simple and pure.

'A strange incident at Kasan and your questions as to my name and family, have given me a desire to entrust you with certain details, solely because I have a sister Vera who should know of my death ; and I will ensure safe means that you may be the medium to give her the intelligence.

'Do I awaken interest ? Do you consent to hear my past life, and to make use of the knowledge when I cease to live ?

'My work ends with my life. Whilst I live, I am without name and family, but to withhold my name after my last breath would be an injustice to many.

'I prefer to write in the English language, and leave this letter without signature. We are friends.'

'No legacy so rich as honesty;' to work out the means by which Ossinman could leave this legacy severely taxed Madame Rimboff, and, after she had perused his letter, curiosity, fear, and generosity actuated her in turn.

Her curiosity was keen to know who this man was who was ever kind and genuine, who possessed a disposition that was never excited to boisterous moods nor depressed to despondency, but whose face was ever marked by the cheerful animation of active thought, far removed from the irritable sensitiveness that could be touched by trivialities.

Madame Rimboff longed to know more of the man who had filled the great vacancy in her heart by awakening in her sympathy and a yearning to help, and in whom she had found an object to give her a new pleasure. She knew him to be accomplished, a scholar, a man of refined taste, and possessing the exquisite susceptibilities of a true gentleman. From her husband she had learned he was the elegant writer who had attracted the notice of all Europe, and whose name had merged into Rimboff's name, and that he wrote desiring no distinction, but as a valve to relieve a full mind that gathered material for the good of others, and that he was too modest to fear rivalry; if his work had merit, let it but benefit his cause, and Rimboff might freely reap all praise.

Madame Rimboff's curiosity in this most mysterious man was checked, for she recalled her husband's words, 'Ossinman's secret is safe when in his own keeping; avoid knowing more than this,—he stands alone and unknown in our midst doing noble work.' These words carried greater weight now than when uttered, and Madame Rimboff decided Ossinman's true name and position should remain unknown to her. Still, the generosity true to her character was with her, and, though she declined to hear Ossinman's secret, it actuated her to write her reply thus:—

'DEAR FRIEND,—I refuse to know your secret; but I will render the service you ask of me, if you can devise any means by which I can serve you, and I, as the medium, remain undiscovered. Remember my life may end before yours. We must still be friends.'

Madame Rimboff gave Ossinman her note after they entered the railway carriage that was to convey them from Tzaritsym to Kalatch on the Don.

Ossinman read the brief note, made no comment when Madame Rimboff said,—

'Do not be hurt by my reply; possibly you may never require the service you ask of me.'

He tore the letter into small pieces, which he

threw, one by one, out of the carriage window, and the wind carried them away and scattered them far apart.

After a few minutes' thought, Ossinman said,—

'I thank you for your frank answer; now this secret shall be mine for ever. We are still friends, though my request is refused; and, dear Madame, your aid may be required soon. I get weaker and—but no matter! I will find other means to attain my desire, and you shall be all unknown if you aid me.'

Another traveller entered the carriage, and the conversation turned on general topics, in which Ossinman took a lively part, although his secret hung on him heavily.

CHAPTER XXI.

A RELIC.

'I fear not, Fate, thy pendant shears;
There are who pray for length of years;
To them, not me, allot 'em.
Life's cup is nectar at the brink,
Midway a palatable drink,
And wormwood at the bottom.'

Chigwell Revisited.—J. SMITH.

NOTWITHSTANDING the affection that had sprung up between Madame Rimboff and Ossinman, the knowledge that a secret unwillingly held destroyed the strict accord and unity of their companionship.

'Is it well to withhold the secret?' was the question that troubled Ossinman, who was true as Ripon steel. 'Is my refusal to hear the secret a wise act?' was the question that many times recurred to Madame Rimboff's mind. Possibly Madame Rimboff was at fault, but she never

reverted to the subject again. Alas! how often, to avoid holding a secret, we stay the word that would solve a mystery or alter a life's course.

Madame Rimboff and Ossinman remained no longer at Rostov than was necessary to regain strength to proceed on the journey with ease. Though Madame Rimboff expected letters from Vera awaited her at Yalta, her interest was centred in her sick companion, whom she would not allow to move a stage further without consulting his comfort.

Again *en route*, a steamer carries them, not on river now, but on the Sea of Azov, and they wend their way on its shallow waters, all smooth and placid, and, though under influence of sun and shade, colourless, the pale, cold hues giving little or no beauty in reflection.

On the travellers went to Alushta, the threshold of the beauties of the Crimea. Ossinman took pleasure in the coast scenery that came in view. All was new to him, but to Madame Rimboff the scenery had lost novelty, and the interest in it had passed away as in a twice-told tale, yet it cheered her to see Ossinman so happy in his present surroundings.

At length Yalta was reached.

The pretty, bright, white town; the soft breezes from the Euxine; the luxuriant villa (Madame Rimboff's marine residence), filled with home comforts that Ossinman had long

ago abandoned, influenced him with a feeling that stimulated a love for those who had forced him to accept their hospitality; a free gift that he had no means to repay except by due appreciation—that act of gratitude that is so sweet a reward to a benefactor.

For two months Ossinman tried to be engrossed in writing light tales of fiction, telling pathetically his country's grievances, but failed, for ever the mystery that he had caused to shroud his life fretted him, and haunted his mind, and became the one strain of his thought. Two months sufficed to tone down the harshness that Madame Rimboff laid to her charge in refusing to become Ossinman's confidant, and she thought no more of the probable importance of Ossinman's stifled disclosures.

It was a glorious day when Madame Rimboff and Ossinman sauntered over the crests of wooded hills, and rested awhile near the ruins of Uchansu Tsaz—the fortress of the waterfall—standing on a rock in the midst of a shady wood. Madame Rimboff found Ossinman *distrait;* he answered her queries in monosyllables, and eventually both lapsed into silence.

After a long pause, Madame Rimboff said vaguely, speaking aloud her thought,—

'What would I give for a cup of cold water!'

'You shall have water. I will fetch it fresh from the cascade—Uchansu Falls are near,'

replied Ossinman with alacrity, eager to assist his friend.

'We will go together,' said Madame Rimboff, as she put her hand on Ossinman's arm quickly to stay him. 'Foolish boy, to go on such an errand. How is the water to be carried?'

'There are plenty of hollowed stones about —still it is better that Mahomed should go to the mountain,' replied Ossinman with a smile, as he raised Madame Rimboff from her stony seat.

The sound of the splashing water was heard by Madame Rimboff and Ossinman after they had walked a short distance, then came in view the cascade and stream that are so great a boon to Yalta. A water-worn stone was soon found, and sips of cool water assuaged Madame's thirst.

Upon a crag on the edge of the rocky gorge again rested Ossinman and Madame Rimboff. Now the splashing and rippling of the falls brought a soothing sense of peacefulness to Ossinman, and as the monotonous cadences continued, they carried an influence to his mind that nerved him to speak with firmness and courage on a subject that lay on his conscience as a weighty duty unfulfilled.

Ossinman spoke abruptly, saying,—

'Madame, my dearest friend, listen to me once more. I feel as if I have received a message from God, and I must put away all fear. My duty is to

obey God, by following the dictates of truth, as well as serving my country's cause. Now to you I must entrust the means to reveal this truth. I have a relic, prized once by my mother, a small cross—a Greek cross—for she was a Russian; it is the only remnant that I have that belonged to her. At the back of the cross there is a small slide, under the slide is a groove. That groove now holds a roll of thin paper, on which I have written enough of my secret that is necessary to be made known to the world. Will you take this cross, keep it, and when I become weaker—nay, dying—will you hang it about my neck, after you have read the writing and again enclosed the paper in the groove? When on my breast, strangers may handle the cross, curiosity will lead them to remove the slide and read the paper, and you will only be the means used to connect the past with the present and future.'

Ossinman took from his breast pocket a small case, opened it, and displayed to view the cross of which he spoke, that was of very old workmanship.

'Can you not always wear that cross unseen? Surely no suspicion could be attached to so common an act.'

'Do you refuse this request! O God! I could not wear this relic except as dead or dying. I will withdraw the condition that you

read the paper; though your knowledge of its purport would give those dear to me and those unknown to me a better chance to settle aright all that my demise must engender. Now, it is not much to ask you to hold this cross until that day comes: it is not much, but is it too much?'

Madame Rimboff could not resist the feeling of compassion that came to her, and she accepted the cross with an awe similar to the feeling that might be experienced in possessing a written confession of a guilty man, or by a nervous person dreading a fiery ordeal.

'Is this responsibility I take upon myself fraught with danger to those whom I love?'

'Fear nothing. I would not injure you or yours! The writing alone has value when I become known and lifeless. I had resolved to die nameless, but—but—'

Ossinman paused abruptly, and after reflecting a few minutes, continued speaking in a serious tone,—

'I confess the knowledge I have recently gained, and probed to the bottom, and found true, leads me to be honest at death. My corpse with a name will not injure my country's cause or my dearest friends, and God knows how soon my life may end!'

'Hush, Ossinman! You must not drift into despondency, nor tell me your secret.'

'I will not.'

'Be hopeful, for you are gaining strength and health.'

A sickly smile played on Ossinman's face, as he scanned his thin hands.

'I will not deceive myself, I am drifting. But why do I talk thus? What care I for life? Once I loved life for the pleasures it brought me. Once before I tried to help the unhappy; now I am weak, my life is bitter and distasteful; except for your goodness and love, I would gladly be quit of it.'

'Hush again, Ossinman. No flagging in spirit; life should be bright in one so young; and, besides, you make me sad.'

'Forgive me. I chose to play the part I have followed, for well "I know the masses, and within is the fountain of good, and it will ever bubble up if thou wilt ever dig;" and I will dig as long as I have breath. But, to use a Chinese proverb, to hang a lantern on a pole, I cannot. I will remember my relations in the eleventh hour, and they shall know when my beacon was highest, and used as a mark to guide the course of freedom, their interests were dear to me; and you will help me to give them this knowledge by carrying out your promise. You have made me happy, and a brother may yet have justice done him.'

Madame Rimboff made no reply, as she had

no wish to entangle herself in Ossinman's secret. She had lived so long herself under the veil of mystery and secrecy, that she dreaded to brave the risk of lifting the veil of mystery off her friend.

Madame Rimboff's silence was not misunderstood by Ossinman, and he spoke no more of himself—he had said enough to suit his design. Thus—

> 'We act by fits and starts, like drowning men,
> But just peep up, and then pop down again.
> Let those who call us wicked change their sense;
> For never men lived more on Providence.'

CHAPTER XXII.

YALTA.

'Circumstances are like clouds, continually gathering and bursting; while we are laughing, the seed of trouble is put into the wide, arable land of events.'

KEATS.

SUMMERS and winters gently graduate from season to season at Yalta. No snows nor biting winds chill the winter air; all that is disagreeable is felt north of the sheltering mountains, and Yalta is ever mild, genial, and temperate.

Three years had passed away since Ossinman gave Madame Rimboff his sacred relic, the Greek cross, and the secret it contained was still intact. In spite of the motherly care of Madame Rimboff, and the mild climate of Yalta, Ossinman was still feeble in health, and led the life of an invalid. The town of Yalta was bright and gay, for the tourists' season had commenced; and no less gay was the sea,—pleasure-boats

skimmed its surface, and plied hither and thither freighted with beings in quest of variety or happiness.

Part of this gay flotilla lay idle, moored close to the shores of the Euxine, or anchored in the little bay. This scene brought to Madame Rimboff's mind the remembrance of Cowes and Torquay, and many of the yachts and yachtsmen hailed from those ports.

Madame Rimboff watched from her villa the picturesque sails of the little boat that carried Rimboff and Ossinman on a track that had no definite object for its course.

A long life, wherein thousands of varied days have passed away calmly, may be marred in one day's act. No future can be foretold of the strongest anchor; a rude force may carry it away and render it useless. Alas! so may man's conscience become prostrate and unfelt; a strong force of circumstances may uproot that anchor, and a life may drift and wreck at last that had been safely upheld through many dangers and troubles.

Rimboff's daily fear of identification as Krainsky, caused him to visit Yalta to evade those who eagerly sought him. Even under the name of Rimboff, he feared the man whom he had saved from death might point out the track to lead to his discovery. Brother raises his hand against brother to serve a political caprice,

and often thus a debt of gratitude is dishonoured.

The name of Krainsky, once spoken on the banks of the Volga, had grown into a loud cry, and had awoke a vigilance on the part of the police that threatened danger to Rimboff's safety. It had been hinted that the night on which Nieff was foully drowned that Krainsky was near the spot, and the darkness alone allowed him to escape his pursuers. Exaggeration led to invention, and sensational tales passed from mouth to mouth, until Krainsky's name again worked terror, and was made to bear the odium of every word of sedition or treason uttered, and every revolutionary act. Even arrests had been made, but the unfortunate victims to clamour were in each case proved to be fairly honest men with names untainted.

Rimboff heard himself made the desperado he was not. From whom sprung this tumult? He could not find the source of action. He knew there was one, bound only by that brittle bond, a promise, who could prove him to be Krainsky, and deliver him to his enemies.

Personally Rimboff had no dread to face all events, but for him to be suspected to be Krainsky would give the *coup de grâce* to that section of his party who advocated moral pressure, and kept in check the unruly element that

was gaining strength as a dangerous force that desired to use more desperate means to obtain freedom. This party respected no obstacle, not even life, if it hindered the accomplishment of designs that Rimboff held would ruin their common cause, and give strength to the minions of despotism.

Yalta was to Rimboff a place of security, where he could screen himself from observation among a class of people who gave no thought to revolutionary or political matters. To be happy under any state or rule that did not make their pleasures less, was the disposition of prosperous Yalta's inhabitants.

Another inducement to visit Yalta, existed in the thought that Rimboff might, by word of mouth, give the raw material to Ossinman that he was to etherealise and cleverly spin into a tale that should go forth to the world purged of all the dangerous facts of locality or date, yet leaving sufficient substance in it to suit the aim of his desires, viz., to lay bare the plague spot of his day,—the tyranny of the necessary surroundings of despotism, injustice, fears, and victims.

Thus laden with weighty projects, the little sailing boat scudded on, and was soon lost to Madame Rimboff's sight, and she turned to her one solace when alone, Vera's letters.

Extracts from these letters will form a sum-

mary of the leading events that had worked many changes in the space of three years, and will unfold Vera's history.

Extract I. 'Your letters, dear mother, are of priceless value to me. I do my best to be happy, for I am bound to be strong and cheerful, to play my part in the world. To act up to this pitch of self-abnegation, my health and mental condition must be kept in working order. First, I must have peace of mind. I obtain that by schooling myself into forgetting my past pleasures; dwelling on nothing that is of a painful character, and fancying myself even fortunate. I am, at least, resolved to be resigned to my fate. Matters might be worse; I am a success; I get good news from Malavita; my children are well; and my capital is increasing, and good investments will quickly double it. Dear Athie's jealous fit is over; I have his fullest confidence, and live again among my friends.'

Extract 2. 'My dear friend Sir John Donwell and his eldest son have met with a serious accident. Sir John possesses mines, and takes an interest in his miners. Some doubts prevailing among the men that all was not safe in a certain section, caused him to have it surveyed. Still the men were dissatisfied; not so, Sir John. He accepted the surveyor's reports, and went to the mines, accompanied by

his son. His prestige among the men, earned by former acts of generosity, gave them confidence that the surveyor of mines had failed to do, and a right loyal reception awaited Sir John at the pit's mouth. The women and children, clad in their best attire, were among the group. This picture of loyal joy was soon turned into one of mourning. The cage in which were Sir John, his son, and overseer, by some mismanagement, ran down with a velocity so great that the occupants were pitched out, and fell a distance of many feet. The news was soon heard above, and many means were used to mitigate the sufferings of the three men. Surgical aid could do little, and the first words of the surgeon confirmed the opinion that there was little hope of recovery in any one case. The overseer was dead when brought up; Sir John and his son breathed, and they were carried to a house, and remained in a precarious state.'

Extract 3. 'Sir John lived one day after his son's death, and a painful hour it was for me to see life ebb away from my dear friend. I am at Briand Hall. My good, kind friends were buried to-day. I shall leave here to-morrow.'

Extract 4. 'I am in great anxiety. Athelstan is ill of fever; his life, I fear, is in danger. The Bishop writes: "Malavita is now visited by the plague, that gathers with great regularity its

annual tithe. Many are being decimated; may your husband not be numbered among the victims, is my earnest prayer."'

Extract 5. 'The Bishop writes me that Athelstan's fever is increasing, but the doctors agree that he may recover, having so strong a constitution. But we know that fever is fatal to the strongest. I am so powerless to render him any service: this feeling nearly drives me mad. I picture him languishing under the throes of acute fever, parched and— But I will not try to rouse my feelings. I cannot. I long to be by his side, but I am here, I am here, mad and bewildered with grief.'

Extract 6. 'Six days' suspense has brought my mind to a state of distraction, and my thoughts run wild; my very actions are becoming scarcely under my own control. I walk, ride, drive, but find no relief in such recreation. Cousin Ralph is so sympathetic, that I can speak of the whole engrossing question that haunts me. Does Athelstan live? We have now despatched a telegram to Malavita. I cannot wait for the mail. I fear the Bishop may be ill. Dear mother, I miss you more and more! When am I to see you?'

Extract 7. 'A letter from the Consul of Malavita tells me Athelstan's fever is abating—the crisis over. He is terribly weak, and is advised to leave Malavita as soon as he has sufficient

strength to be moved from his present quarters. Bishop Donwell has fever. He devoted so much of his spare time to nursing Athelstan when in danger, that he became overworked, and the fever has attacked him whilst in this debilitated condition. How much kindness I owe to that good, unselfish man!'

Extract 8. 'Dearest mother, rejoice with me. Athelstan has been moved from his unhealthy quarters, is now on the sea coast, and has written me a letter of some length. Bishop Donwell is still ill, but has lived over the time of danger, for the fever kills at an early stage. The deaths of Sir John and his son make a great difference in the position of Bishop Donwell. He is now rich, takes the title and all that appertains to it. What a change this will be for him; and at the time of this good fortune he is almost a dying man. Oh, the irony of fortune!'

Extract 9. 'I have had many letters from Clara lately. She is in Italy still; and possibly Athie may make her house his home for a time. The doctors will not sanction his return to England in the depth of winter. I may go to Italy to meet him, if my theatrical engagements can be made to suit time, otherwise, patience! patience! Yet "I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching." Can I be patient?'

Extract 10. 'I have so much to tell you, and have to-day so little time to devote to writing, that I can only give you just the bare outline of all I wish you to know. Athie is in Italy, and Clara has written so good an account of his state of health, that I am quite in high spirits, and shall not feel the same misery whilst acting that has been my fate for many months. My very successes, and all the honours shown me, were growing monotonous. I was too heart-sore to appreciate them. Even the hunger for material successes was dormant. Now all is altered, and I again love money, and exert myself to gain it, that Athie may be once more rich. "The Laurium," and the living at Netherness, are vacant. There is news for you. Ugly rumours are floating about that make me suspect we shall hear more of the reason why they are in this plight. Mrs Morgane is still very much engrossed in that uneducated gentleman who is such a riddle. I have also noticed a great change in her manner; she slights me sometimes, and courts me at others. Mr Morgane is *said* to be paralysed and unable to move; but I saw him walking. I will not go to Magna House; it grows too mysterious, and its very luxuriance is oppressive to me, coupled with its dulness.'

Extract 11. 'I told you, dear mother, I should hear more of Gordon—strange news. He had

a long talk with me. In his wild way he made me conversant with many incidents that have led up to the culminating point,—his separation from Clara, and his probable secession from the Church. There is a trait in that man I admire. You see the worst of him; even in his gayest mood he is frank and loyal. He does not exonerate himself from blame, but he is lenient in his judgment of himself. His mistake in life he expressed in a word—self-interest. He left me laughing over his altered life, as if life were light, airy, and unsubstantial, and not as it really is—a thing of weighty matter. He may be happy, but I doubt it; for "there's not a string attuned to mirth but has a chord in melancholy."'

Extract 12. 'I have received another visit from Gordon. There is a deeper strata in his frivolous nature, of which his every-day life gives no proof. He has talked seriously to me, and acknowledged that he could no longer lead a life unsuited to his mind and ever be a black sheep. Doubtless, to alter his thoughts to suit his cloth would have been a more righteous act; but if he cannot accomplish that, it is well he should give up all, and not play the hypocrite. He left me with strange words, that may mean much or nothing, and unworthy of the position he held. He is no longer a clergyman; he has given up all clerical distinctions—his sawney hat and long coat—and he has given up a great deal

more,—a good income, and "The Laurium" rent free; but I admire the spirit that actuates him in forfeiting all, out of respect for the cloth he acknowledges he should wear no longer, as its tint does not suit the tinge of complexion that colours his thoughts. I quote his words:—them must send more hermetic powder to Italy, for I foresee a healer will be needed when all my foibles are accounted sins and talked of by the wise men of Gotham. I want to meet Pax—the kiss of peace—to end a flimsy quarrel. Help me." I would help Clara and Gordon to a reconciliation; but how?'

Extract 13. 'Gordon Scott has been again my visitor. Events march on apace that cause him annoyance, if not pain. Nothing has appeared in print that touches his character, but much is whispered. He said seriously he had heard at night the shrieks and wailings of the banshee—his sure warner of evil at all times. I laughed aloud,—"What, Gordon Scott listen to a banshee?" I did not shake his faith in his superstition. He hugged it tightly, and tried to reason with me, and argued with an ingenuity that proved the error of allowing a *lusus naturæ* to grow from a myth. However, this banshee has been the faithful warner in his family for many years, and is not to be slighted now, out of gratitude for past services. My arguments proving vain, I used Johnson's clencher, "What

reason did not dictate, reason cannot explain," and suggested he might let his banshee exist or not according to whim; then finding him still serious upon a foolish subject, I turned the conversation, and inquired if he took any interest in Mr Cade's case. His surprise was genuine at my question. The name of Cade altered his grave mood, and he asked querulously, "What am I to hear? A truer woman never lived on earth." Thinking, probably, that he knew more of Mrs Cade than I had read in the paper, I expressed a hope that he was right; her defence might clear her; at present, it had not been heard. My remark staggered him; he spoke out plainly—he had "not seen Mrs Cade for a whole year; she was a silly little thing, and he had feared mischief might spring from innocent chaff if allowed to vegetate in poor Johnny's heart, etc., etc., so gave up going to the 'Priory,' and sought diversion elsewhere." I felt a little amused, and said, "A confession! Possibly the banshee warns you thus; beware of poor Johnny." Gordon laughed as he said,—"Poor Johnny would not hurt a fly;" then he grew cautious, and exclaimed, "What is John to me, or I to him? but the banshee's wailing and shrieking has a meaning I will not neglect. I will go to America for a time,—know nothing about it." "When clouds appear, wise men put on their cloaks," said I,

quoting my favourite bard. "Know nothing; then my cloak will keep me dry when the storm comes." This answer of Gordon's, and his sudden flight to America, makes me fear he dreads being implicated in the Cade quarrel. I pity Gordon.'

Extract 14. 'When am I to have peace? Davids has absconded; our theatre, in a financial sense, is in a desperate plight. Malton is not a business man, but is looking into matters, after having sanctioned extravagance that is appalling. So much outlay has been spent on stage trappings, that now we are at a standstill. Of course, light pieces depend on clothes, pretty faces, and such like, but a fine drama requires good acting, true delineation of passions, and such sentiments as bless or curse human beings. Pay actors well, and let them be of the best material; but let their trappings be effective, not costly, has in vain been my advice. I alone profit by all the work gone through. Many of the actors are owed large sums; the management was reckoned so good that they left their salaries, bearing interest, in our "firm." Well, this firm is collapsing, but the public know nothing of the grave state of its finance.'

Extract 15. 'Oh, mother! affairs at the theatre are getting worse, at least worse for me. Davids has acted honourably. He had not courage to give us proper warning of the

threatened difficulties, dreading the effect of this bad news upon us. He thus accounts for his flight, and we accept his version. True it may be, for he has sent us all papers and receipts that he held, and also *the piece of paper* I signed when Ralph proposed to purchase the theatre. Few words are upon it, and no thought was given to them when written; they were to serve a purpose; that over, it would have been well to have destroyed the paper. But, alas! it exists, and the import it carries is, I am liable for theatre debts; I have taken profits, and am a partner with Ralph. This is no light matter: it carries with it all my hard-earned gains. Law is prosaic, and its concise meaning is, all the hungry Shylocks will claim their due, and I must bleed that they may get their pound of flesh. Am I not grievously unfortunate? Oh, mother, I never imagined this blow could come upon me! Am I not unlucky? My most sensitive nerves are touched. I have often thought my health might break down, but never my pile of money. I was prepared for the one, but not the other. Now if both go? Well, mother, I still have some good people about me. The affairs of the theatre are now known to the public, and my partnership made clear by law. I have had most generous sympathy shown me, and liberal offers of support. Is it not strange I feel so brave under the heavy

losses I must sustain? I never loved money, I never coveted it, except to give it to Athie; for his sake I feel this blow is cruel; still, if life and strength hold out, I may make another fortune.'

Extract 16. 'My friends tell me I am acting better than ever, and I am well supported by a sympathetic public; but, alas! I must act some time before I can put one fraction of a farthing away as profit. All the money I have invested in my boy's name is his, held in trust, it cannot be claimed by law. We are not bankrupts—time is given to pay off debts—Ralph's honourable arrangements help our position, as they have won golden opinions from many of our creditors. I will do my best to second his intentions, yet I fear bankruptcy in the end. Debts come in so fast, and we have nothing to prove the claim just or unjust.

Extract 17. 'Bad news from Italy this morning. Athie has had a relapse: his return to England is again postponed. Was ever mortal so tormented as I? My engagements for the next month must be fulfilled. I could not leave Ralph in his present state of financial difficulty, and my performances have been so fully advertised and responded to by the public that a full house for many weeks hence may be relied upon. I have not the heart to leave England for Italy; and yet, mother, it is so hard

to keep away from dear Athie at this hour. Clara writes his condition very clearly. She advises me not to go to Italy, as Athie may soon pick up again, and we might cross on the road. I may be very wicked, yet, very like a woman, I cannot forget Clara and Athie are cousins, and passed their childhood together, and were once lovers. I try to be more noble in thought, yet one touch of jealousy will come; I do my best to smother it.'

Extract 18. 'I have a letter from Italy, written by dear Athie. I cannot say it is his letter; it is so cold, unlike the letters he has lately sent me, that I fail to understand it. Can he misconstrue my motives? does he think me unkind? It is difficult to fathom the feelings of another. I have placed my position before him, and shown how irretrievable ruin must follow should I leave England now, as it is the beginning of the season, and everybody is in London, and our harvest time gives good promise of abundance. He must understand me, unless his mind is much perverted. Oh, mother! how soon jealousy is developed, and how often is its foundation shallow; and yet it is so difficult to uproot it! Athie eulogises Clara's goodness and kindness. I will try to be grateful to her, —try to think she is noble, and I am mean to mistrust her. Invalids are often exacting, and when Athie comes to England in May, all will

be well. I will not think my patience and endurance have been fruitless, and that so sad and terrible a calamity be my recompense as coldness and ingratitude from Athie, and hypocrisy and unfaithfulness from Clara.'

When too dusk to read Vera's letters, Madame placed them under lock and key, and sauntered out to meet Rimboff, for she had seen his yacht come close to shore. She failed to meet him, so retraced her steps. On her route she met a man, whose features were well known to her, but so altered, from robust roundness to sharp, angular lines, that she forgot caution, and hastened to accost him. The man thrust out his hand at arm's length, as a sign for her not to approach nearer. He said in a quick, low voice,—

'Madame Rimboff, I cease to know you. Once you were my favourite sister; I gave you a free choice,—my home, or comparative poverty. You chose to hold communication with a man unworthy of your sacrifice, and now once more you have united your life with his, and bear a name robbed from the dead. You stagger—well you may!'

'You wrong my noble husband!'

'A Nihilist noble! Vera, no work is noble that cannot bear the light of day; and the workman accords with his work. You are not accountable for your husband's follies. I spare

Krainsky for your sake, far more than for the aid he rendered me. He must cease to be an agitator among a peaceful people, or the promise that imposes silence on me may be broken. Warn him.'

'Oh, mercy! Be loyal to your word. You cannot mean that you threaten him!'

'Warn him.'

'I know you could put him under the law's lash, and, without trial or justice, shut the prison door upon him, and leave him undefended, but—'

'I know he bears a dead man's name. How did that man die? Nihilists are prone to evil deeds, worked out with a cunning and secrecy.'

'Heavens! You cannot suspect—'

Madame Rimboff's emotion made her voice tremble so violently that she could not finish her sentence.

A ghastly smile moved the thin face of Caston as his sister seized his hand and held it fast. He said, with a sarcastic ring of voice,—

'Suspect! Oh, no! Who could suspect a Nihilist? The very name clears him from suspicion, and marks him plainly a criminal.' Then in a softer tone he added,—'These words are too true for you to hear unmoved. Krainsky will meet with no mercy from the powers he struggles to overthrow, so warn him betimes.'

Madame Rimboff dealt a bold thrust as she spoke openly a suspicion that had long haunted

her, saying, as she snatched her hand impetuously from her brother,—

'Whose boat were you in on the Volga? Does suspicion cling to you, or are you beyond suspicion, and criminal? Beware of menacing my husband, whilst you have not cleared up that night's foul work!'

A look of dread, even terror, made Caston's thin face look so haggard that Madame Rimboff almost regretted she had uttered the cruel words. She could not recall them, and as she saw they hit heavily, she knew there was a power with her that she might use to benefit her husband.

'When did I injure you, Vera, that you should injure me?' stammered Caston, for the dread of suspicion being cast on him as the perpetrator of a foul deed had troubled him long, and was one reason that he kept his promise and screened Krainsky's name from discovery.

'Never; but you may injure my husband.'

'Let my past forbearance bespeak my future actions. My warning to Krainsky through you is given to save, not to sacrifice him, though I loathe his very name. Vera, one word more before we part; I feel much aggrieved, yet as a brother I give you full permission to seek shelter under my roof, should you ever need it. Evil days will come, if my warning is unheeded.

Madame Rimboff's mind was so bewildered

by all she heard that she could form no more suitable reply to this offer than,—

'You still show your old generosity to me. I thank you, though I hope never to require your aid.'

'Vera, until a brother's hand may be required to save you, avoid me.' Caston assumed a distant manner as he concluded thus,—'I cease now to regard you as my sister; you and I are again strangers. Good-bye, Madame Rimboff, for ever.'

'Stop,' said Madame Rimboff, as Caston walked quickly from her. She followed him saying, 'How did you know me by that name?'

Caston stopped, but did not turn to look at his sister, as he said harshly,—

'When you find that out you will have discovered my secret and your husband's danger.'

Then Caston walked quickly away, leaving Madame Rimboff mystified by his answer.

'He is a spy—a mean spy,' murmured she, turning away and walking in the direction of her villa.

Later on, when the dusk had become dark, Caston loitered on the shore near Rimboff's yacht.

Rimboff's suspicions had proved correct—he was watched by an active enemy. It were better to avoid a friend than, by mistake, meet a foe, so he was cautious, fearing that the man

who moved stealthily to and fro had some secret design. Ossinman, too, desired to avoid leaving the yacht whilst the man appeared to be on the watch; he was afraid for the safety of Rimboff, yet had he known the motives that actuated that restless man, he might have had greater fears for himself.

It was dark when Rimboff and Ossinman walked arm-in-arm to the villa, and thus they escaped detection; the watcher, also, was unrecognised. Yet a suspicion was attached to him, creating the fear that he might be one of those greedy, petty tyrants who reap good out of the misfortunes of others and dodge footsteps to benefit their dishonest purposes.

CHAPTER XXIII.

EXPECTANT.

'Uphold me, Father, in my loneliness,
A little longer! Aid me, give me strength.'
TENNYSON.

DAY after day passed away, burdened more heavily with anxiety, as the silent footstep of Time marched onwards. Athelstan's arrival in England was still delayed, and Vera was expectant.

In her struggle against debt and ruin, she had grown eccentric; thus she had ceased to recognise the supremacy of Mrs Grundy, and had followed a fashion of her own, according well with her moral courage, genius, and vigour. She had individualised herself, and her rough edges refused to roll smoothly in the circle of society. Vera had met all her trials with courage and calmness; inbred hope and confidence seemed to inspire her with that invisible power that surmounts evils, but never anticipates, nor

is cast down by them. Great as she was as an actress, as a woman she was greater,—made so by heart, mind, and soul, that raised her to a standard that the wise name noble, but which ranks as nothing in the fashionable world, for no money can purchase it, therefore of what value is it? As valueless as the oyster's pearl that is in the deep waters unmarked by man, it is simply a pearl above price overlooked. The tinge of jealousy born of a true woman's instinct had faded out of Vera's heart. It was no mean jealousy that had troubled her; it was fear lest old associations might weaken a love that an absence of years might have already militated; it was the knowledge of human nature that had led her mind astray. But now all was right again, and no thought of jealousy disturbed her. Whilst Vera read Athelstan's letter just received, couched in terms of affection, she felt she had the whole of his big, kindly heart, and his brave, loyal honour. No remembrance that he had ever doubted this was with her, yet she sighed as she placed his letter carefully amongst many others received from him, and murmured, 'To-morrow! it is weary waiting for to-morrow, and the morning's post may beg me wait until to-morrow's morrow.' Vera took up her book of engagements; she glanced over dates. The line that ranged with to-morrow's date ran thus: 'Act in "Evangeline," by special

desire.' She threw the book down carelessly, saying to Mrs Morgane, who was with her,—

'Ah, I had forgotten royalties of several Courts will form part of my audience to-morrow. Dear Athie will find me developed into a celebrity: his presence will impel me to surpass all my grand achievements. If I mistake not, I shall add another brilliant success to my long line.'

'Possibly,' replied Mrs Morgane, who carried a cold, distant manner with her. When in this mood, she was always short in her answers, being irritable in temper. She had heard the last news of Athelstan, and felt no further interest in conversing, except so far as came within her own questionings.

Now her words came with some difficulty, as she wished to screen their importance under a careless manner, and she formed more than one arrangement of words in her mind before she asked the following common-place question :—

'Has anyone ever traced a likeness between you and Athelstan? It is said that husbands and wives often resemble each other.'

'No, never; do you see a likeness between us?'

'Sometimes,' replied Mrs Morgane, looking full in Vera's face.

Vera took out a little mirror that stood as an ornament on a table, in her hand, and scanning the features it reflected critically, she said,—

'The colour of my hair, and perhaps the colour of my eyes are similar, but Athie's eyes are of a deeper colour, and my features harder; I see that my nose, too, is a little like dear Athie's; how about my mouth?' Vera laughed, and thus she lost the lines that might or might not resemble her husband's. 'I cannot trace any further likeness, except in my teeth; they are as even as Athie's, and I daresay I have as many, for we have both cut our wisdom teeth, and grown grave in consequence; altogether, I fancy I am like Athie, and I am sure I cannot resemble a better man.'

'I wish I could not see you like him,' said Mrs Morgane pettishly.

'I cannot help it if I am,' said Vera, as she replaced the mirror on the table. 'If your son marries a wife, and by rule a likeness grows between a married pair, you must not resent the fact that your son's wife resembles him; and until you spoke on the subject, I never gave one thought to it; let us now dismiss it. Shall I reserve a good seat for you to-morrow evening?'

'No, Vera, my business for to-morrow will be too important; I could not waste any part of the day in a theatre.'

Vera made no reply.

Mrs Morgane rose from her chair, and in her stately walk showed Vera that she was in no

humour to receive any favour or even kind word from her; but Vera was not prepared to see her quit the room without giving her hand or taking leave of her in any form. But she did this strange act, and on her way to the door, put a letter on the table, saying at the same time,—'That letter is for Athelstan; it is unsealed, so you can read it if you have any wish to know its contents.'

Vera accepted this insult from Mrs Morgane without asking a word of explanation; she hurried with no stately step to the bell-pull and rang, so that Mrs Morgane should have proper attention from her servant, and was soon engrossed in home and professional duties that caused Mrs Morgane's behaviour to be forgotten. She did not feel inquisitive as to the contents of Mrs Morgane's letter to Athelstan; probably the fact of its being unfastened, destroyed any curiosity that it otherwise might have awakened. The letter was addressed simply 'Athelstan,' the surname of Morgane omitted. This gave rise to no suspicious thought in Vera's mind; for though the omission had been a matter of grave consideration on Mrs Morgane's part, its intended import was lost upon Vera. When she took up the letter, it was simply to fasten the envelope firmly, and having done this, she replaced the letter on the table, murmuring, 'I will not pry into the feelings or words of welcome that pass

between mother and son; it is natural that Mrs Morgane should wish to be remembered by Athie, and he shall see her letter as she left it on the table. Poor woman, ill-tempered to-day, to-morrow, possibly, gushingly affectionate, she is a greater riddle to me that ever.

The sense of loneliness came over Vera as the day began to close, and, her necessary work ended, she was satiated with silence; in it breathed too sadly a weird eloquence that stirred a wife's tenderest feelings, and the only response gained was memory, as it were, in the presence of a husband's ghost, ever haunting and engrossing all thought, and as a ruler pervading over all actions.

Vera became sad, so she forced herself to forget her misery in song. She sang one song after another, English ballads, Scotch and Irish melodies, Italian airs, no thought given to selection. Enough; she touched a few cords at last that made her exclaim, 'Why should I sing that air when I can go to the opera and hear it sung to perfection. I will go; "Roberto" is on to-night.' Centuries ago was written the fact that prudence is the first thing to forsake the wretched, and Vera acted after that fashion.

Looking at her watch, time told her she had a choice of dinner or dress; she chose dinner, but that must be scrambled through at once, to

enable her to be at the opera house in time for the first act.

One of her eccentricities being to forget her meals entirely, and another to expect them ready at the moment she thought of them, Mrs Burt was not surprised with the order, 'Send up something for dinner that is ready, Madame starts in five minutes.'

'Another hurry-skurry! all this will end soon, I am thinking,' said Mrs Burt, with an expression that made her words more forcible, and provoked an answer from Messenger.

'You need not grumble; a better mistress than Madame does not live. Why, one can do just what one likes; and she is *deuced* kind to you.'

'Well, look alive, Messenger, and do your duty.'

'I intend to fetch a cab, for that is my order; and I have an order for you "Miss Pert,"' said Messenger pompously, to a maid: 'Have the opera cloak ready and waiting in the hall.'

'You have learned precious grand manners at "The Laurium;" don't play them off here, and leave me to do your work, and call me rude names, Mr Peacock,' retorted the maid addressed.

'Don't talk about doing your duties, but do them, and leave off jarring. My brains are

addling. What can I send up?' said Mrs Burt.

'You need not look far; send up our supper—that ought to be ready; I shall want a feed before I start for my opera.'

'Yes, one can do that. Our supper for Madame, and her dinner for us. Now, Messenger, be back in time to get it hot and cooked to a turn.'

So Vera, almost dinnerless, started off to kill time and drown care in the charms of music.

All went happily until she left the opera house, and was about to enter the cab, the door of which was held open by Messenger. A man accosted her; she recognised him in an instant as the 'Turk,' the same mad Turk, only years older, who had alarmed her so greatly at Windermere.

'We meet again,' said he, in broken English. 'You remember me, or if not me, this little likeness; I have carried that many years now.'

'Yes, yes,' said Vera hurriedly; 'I remember all; I have no time to talk to you now,' and was about to enter the cab, when the Turk put his hand gently on her shoulder, saying,—

'Stop, one word; where and when can I see you?'

Vera hesitated in fear when she felt the touch of the man's hand, but she made no reply to his question.

'At the "Minerva" to-morrow morning?' suggested the Turk hurriedly.

'Yes, to-morrow morning at the "Minerva,"' repeated Vera. She knew she would not be there at that time, and she desired to get rid of the madman by any means in her power.

The Turk left, satisfied with his success; and Vera stepped quickly into the cab, and, with Messenger seated beside the cabman, she felt safe from any further annoyance.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MISUNDERSTOOD.

'Gold can gild a rotten stick, and dirt sully an ingot.'
SIR PHILIP SIDNEY.

ONG suspense had worked mischievous effects. Keen expectancy had become blunted: its sharp edge had ceased to mangle Vera's sensitive brain and heart. Once more she was straining every nerve to bear calmly her disappointment, for the hour had long passed that Athelstan had appointed for his arrival, and soon she must prepare for her theatrical engagement.

No, she was not expectant, next post might bring news to confirm her dread that a further postponement of Athelstan's return to England was contemplated.

Vera was restless; at one time looking out of the window, and wishing she was at Winander Cottage, away from turmoil and theatres; then turning to some book to glance over its pages,

taking in little of their matter; then taking up Mrs Morgane's letter, and wondering what important work prevented her coming to see her son, instead of writing to him.

Her mind was very active in roving from one object to another when the clock struck. The call was answered readily, for she knew her brougham would soon be at the door to convey her to the "Minerva."

'I feared this; he will not see me as "Evangeline"! Perhaps a just punishment to my pride; and I should have been proud of the reception that awaits me had he been present—now I care for nothing. I am weary, oh, so weary of my life!'

With these muttered words, Vera left her drawing-room to dress for her drive to the 'Minerva.'

Whilst thus engaged, Athelstan drove up to the door from Victoria Station. No luggage encumbered him: he had forgotten that such impedimenta was attached to him. All his thoughts were centred in the dry fact that he was in England once more, and he hastened to meet her whom he held dear.

There was no need for him to ring, for Messenger had been on the alert to assist Athelstan.

'Mrs Morgane at home?' said Athelstan, springing quickly out of the cab.

'Yes, sir; and I am real pleased to see you, sir.'

'Thank you, Messenger. You have known me for some time now; I like to meet old faces.'

'Any luggage?' said Messenger to the cabman as Athelstan passed into the house.

'No; I am waiting to be paid,' was the reply.

Messenger paid the fare, and as he returned to the door, the Turk, whom he had admitted but a few minutes before, passed him and walked quickly up the street.

Messenger's next encounter was Athelstan, with a look of eager inquiry,—

'Who is that man?'

'Don't know his name, sir.'

'I suppose you opened the door to him?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then why do you not know who he is?'

'Well, sir, he spoke to Madame last evening as she left the opera, and she will know his name. I have forgotten it. I could not speak it when he told it me: it was not Smith or any usual name, sir.'

'All right. Let Mrs Morgane know I am here,' said Athelstan, as he returned to the dining-room, and shut the door.

The pride and fierceness of Athelstan's nature was aroused—his blood was up. He wondered at the strange, passionate fears that seemed to damp all his previous ardour, and crush all his anticipations in the dust.

He had entered the dining-room expecting

that Vera would be there to welcome him, but he had found the Turk engaged looking closely at a glass case that stood on a sideboard, and when he turned his face to see who entered the room, a mutual but silent recognition took place; then the Turk immediately left the room.

What trifles may kill a great joy, and leave a lasting sting! Athelstan went to the glass case, on which the bright play of light prevented him seeing its contents—two marmosets. The animals were stuffed, and posed as he had often seen them when alive—side by side, and cracking nuts. Simply a toy! But the Turk and the toy sufficed to bring to mind an old grievance that Athelstan had not wholly forgotten.

Query.—Why had he not forgotten this and other equally small trifles?

Answer.—Because Lady Clara Scott had poisoned his mind—played a false part,—had cunningly touched incidents with the tone of artifice that is sufficient to create and raise that finest of vapours, that most subtle of essences—*doubt*, and thus give to Truth's mirror the slight mist that dims its honest brightness, and at the same time tarnishes with a tinge of distrust all who look on her face. Indeed, Lady Clara had played a game, and lost it; she had staked high, and her best card had proved a failure. Athelstan stood too firm to fall under her play. But Fate played his card against

him, *then* all Clara's tricks counted. Athelstan yielded all too readily, and threw up his game as lost. The root of bitterness was gaining ground in his mind as he stood as one transfixed before the marmosets. No longer did he see them in his pain; hideous phantoms came quickly before his eyes, clouding his thoughts with an uncertainty that rendered him weak.

So quick is thought, in the space of two minutes Athelstan recalled so much of the past, and felt ill-used by being so long left alone.

He abruptly opened he door, and though the plan of the rooms was unknown to him, he ran up the staircase hurriedly, opened a door instinctively as leading to the drawing-room.

The entrance of the room appeared to him to be crowded with obstacles suggestive of lovers' land,—heavy *portières*, high and low screens, large ottomans, comfortable settees, and light, tastily-draped chairs; all annoyed him, and acted as impediments to his free ingress. He had simply entered the room by the wrong door, —at the end where all these things had been placed to give a general effect, as well as to gain space at the larger end of the room for guests to move about with greater freedom.

By the time Athelstan made his way to this space, the right door of the room was opened by Vera, who found no obstacles to ingress; an instant, and her arms were about his neck, and

'My darling Athie at last! My darling, darling Athie!' were the only words she could utter.

Did she think his kiss cold, and the pressure of his hand upon her shoulder light?

Oh, no! She was too overjoyed, too supremely happy, to have any thought but that of engrossing delight that she had her long absent husband again to look upon, and love, and tend as the prime object of life.

'Let me look at you, dearest; you have been so ill, and I could not nurse you.' Vera looked in her husband's face, and turned it fully towards the light as she spoke, as if to scan it more clearly. 'My care, and your native air, will soon make you stronger. You are tired, dearest; sit down.'

Vera had observed the quivering of the muscles in Athelstan's features; the cause she had wholly mistaken.

'I am tired,' said Athelstan, with an effort. A mental storm was raging in the man's mind.

Was he to treat all the gentle love and deep joy that moved Vera as a fraud upon him, all destitute of sincerity? Or was he to take her as a true wife, and give her that honourable place in his heart that would justify him in discarding all rumours heard, all suspicions felt, as of no moment, and of no more substance than idle dreams?

His temples throbbed, the aching pain in his

head seemed to distract him; the conclusion he desired to gain came not; nothing but a blank confusion reigned in his brain. Under the cloak of weariness, he remained silent and unsuspected.

'I am very selfish, Athie, fondling and petting you when you are tired, and perhaps hungry. I wish you had come an hour or two ago, then we should have had more time together, now—'

Athelstan's intense purpose was seen in his eyes—his whole soul shone in them. He took Vera's hand, abruptly interrupting her, saying,—

'Will not all our time in the future be passed together? or have we both something to confess and ask forgiveness for, Vera?'

Vera met Athelstan's deep, searching gaze unflinchingly.

'On my part, Athie, I have no confession to make, and, I hope, nothing to forgive; yet speak, dearest, and rest faith in me, and I will not judge you harshly.'

Vera spoke very calmly, but she had to subdue a rising impulse of resentment, for her great love gave her the desire to show that subjection to her husband which would draw him to her in confidence.

'We have been long parted, Vera, and during that time this desire has actuated me,—to live a life deserving the trust and full reliance that you placed in me. I needed your love; I was

lonely, poor, and my father despised me; my only wealth lay in your love, truth, and fidelity, —would it not be cruel to allow just a thought of suspicion or distrust to mar the sacred love that is the only solace to a much injured life?'

Athelstan spoke with such deep feeling in his voice, that Vera knew how much was concentrated in those few telling words, and she would not treat them lightly.

'Cruel, bitterly cruel! Dearest Athie, you give no credence to such a possibility?'

'Unhappily I do. But you can clear all the suspicion and distrust away,—do you remember a certain Turk, Vera?'

'If you mean the Turk who annoyed me at Windermere, I remember him perfectly; and I saw him yesterday—he is as mad as ever.'

'And I saw him to-day in this house.'

'You did!'

'I did. Now, Vera, I wish to know his name, and why he was here?'

Vera detected a strong ring of suspicion in Athelstan's voice.

'I never heard his name, Athie, nor do I know why he came here; indeed I did not know he had been here, or I should have been frightened.'

A very fiend seemed to be gnawing Athelstan's heart, and goading him to his destruction; the wound was now easily irritated that Lady

Clara had commenced. That heart was now beating fast; old memories, old affections, old suspicions had been stirred, and the current that flowed through all was bitterer than gall.

'I believe you, Vera; you would have been very frightened had you known that I should have seen that Turk. Understand me, Vera, your answer does not satisfy me.'

'I will endeavour to understand you, dearest Athie,' Vera answered meekly.

A suspicion all painful came to her that the fever had left Athelstan with delusions. She would humour them, and as time repaired the mind that fever had damaged, all would be well. And passing delusions were of less import than strong suspicions formed by fantasy.

Again came that heavy beating in Athelstan's temples; the quiet tone of Vera's voice seemed to belie his suspicion of her untruthfulness.

Vera waited for him to speak, and felt so much pity for him. She had known what 'it is, to love,' and had 'found it made of sighs and tears.' But now her love would be 'all adoration, duty, and observance, all humbleness, all patience, all purity, all trial,' and in the end all peace.

Athelstan, agitated and pale, was about to speak, when Messenger entered the room, and announced the carriage was at the door.

Vera was glad of this interruption, and took advantage of it, for had not enough time been

given to delusions? On the table was Mrs Morgane's letter; she gave it to Athelstan.

'A letter your mother left for you; when you have read it, tell me all about our child, our little Hephzibah.'

Athelstan took the letter saying,—

'Do you think that a cunningly-devised scheme shall be allowed to work mischief and not be sifted? No, Vera, we may be better friends later on.'

'In mercy, Athie, spare me! Have we not known deep sorrows, and with aching hearts longed for the sympathy and love that we needed one from the other? Now we are together, is it not natural to speak of our children?' and Vera stopped speaking suddenly, for the veins in Athelstan's forehead were starting out as thick cords, and his eyes were lighted with a fierce brightness and fixed on vacancy. The pause lasted a few minutes, in which Vera gathered her scattered ideas as she watched her husband's expression with pain. Her thoughts ran thus:—

Were these all delusions, or were there acts of dishonour or dishonesty that Athelstan desired to disclose to her, though he had said that he had struggled to live an honest life?

Vera could not speak one word of her thoughts; they would not soothe her husband, nor quiet that inward excitement that she saw was racking him. Yet one struggle more she

resolved to make, to stir Athelstan and find an explanation to the painful mistake that tormented him.

With a face full of devoted love, and a voice trembling with anxiety, Vera said,—

'Dearest Athie, *why* are we not quite happy? Can you tell me?'

Athelstan did not answer directly. There was a sharp sting in the present, that he tried to bear calmly, and, with a strong determination to subdue the irritation it fostered, he withheld saying a word that might create further pain; but he had desperate intentions for future action all formed in thought.

Vera repeated her question,—

'Can you tell me, dearest, what destroys our joy?'

'I have already told you. I will read my mother's letter.' Athelstan broke open the letter, and read the following lines,—

'DEAREST ATHELSTAN, — Come to Magna House directly you can leave home, or after the close of the theatre. Your affectionate mother, E. MORGANE.'

'May I read that letter?—our letters were always read together.'

Athelstan gave Vera the letter without comment.

Vera read the letter, then studied her next move.

'A very short letter,' said Vera, as she returned it to Athelstan. 'Is it not provoking I must act to-night?

'I read the placards—you need not explain.'

Another blank silence followed. The time-piece chimed the quarter hour. Vera was now half an hour late; sharp driving alone would land her at the theatre in time to prepare for her part.

'You are too weary to come with me, Athie?' said Vera, endeavouring to speak carelessly.

'Far too weary, Vera. You go to the theatre, I will go to Magna House.'

'I will drive you; I shall pass Magna House on my way.'

'No, Vera, I prefer to walk.'

Again Messenger came on the scene, this time to give Vera a note marked 'Immediate.'

'They are anxious at my non-arrival,' said Vera, as she tore the note in two. 'Oh, Athie, this is a great pain to me, to leave you thus! Dearest, I will return as soon as possible. I shall not stop to supper to-night.'

'Vera, alter no plans; I will sup at the "Minerva" to-night.'

'You will?'

'Yes, Vera, I will sup with you.'

A strange look passed over Athelstan's face,

denoting the feeling that possessed him. At last he could see one of those suppers that Clara had said were so evil, and the Bishop of Malavita had pronounced quite innocent! He could see Vera among her admirers.

'Dear, good Athie!'

Vera put her arm round his neck and kissed him. Yes, now she felt his kiss cold, and the touch on her shoulder light, and that it slightly pushed her from him. Tears started to her eyes. She hurried away. Why should he see them? They were a humiliation to her, and she would hide them. Self-control had so often been her part to play in life that, difficult as the task was, she accomplished it. Athelstan followed her slowly, and as she stepped into her brougham, he turned in the direction of Magna House.

Vera, sore in heart, bewildered in mind, gave all her energy to the part she was acting, though that cold kiss, that gentle repulse, still lingered with her.

How that marred the joy of her success, one of the greatest she had achieved. Yet a vague idea pervaded her mind that Athelstan might be present during part of her performance, as he would sup with her later on.

END OF VOL. II.

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